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The Critique of Scholastic Language in Renaissance Humanism and Early-Modern Philosophy

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Introduction

Throughout the ages philosophers have questioned our common sense view of the world, claiming that the world is not as it appears to be. This claim is almost the philosopher's *raison d'être*. Philosophy thrives on the idea that there is a deep structure behind the phenomena we perceive and claim to know – matter, substance, powers, forms, Ideas, and so on; it would amount to naive empiricism to think that what we see is all there is to know, or would be enough to justify our knowledge claims. As Robert Pasnau has rightly observed: “Over the centuries, it has been practically definitive of the philosopher's job to subject naive empiricism to a withering critique. Indeed, stages in the development of philosophy can be measured in terms of how far they depart, and in which direction, from our natural but naive pre-theoretical orientation toward empiricism.”¹ This withdrawal from naive empiricism has often (though not necessarily so) gone hand in hand with the development of a language that likewise departs from the common way in which people speak about the world. Like scientists, grammarians, lawyers, theologians, and practitioners of other professions, philosophers too developed their own technical language, sometimes staying fairly close to the common parlance of the time but often introducing more technical, abstract, and formal terminology, needed, so it has always been thought, to refer to deeper levels of reality.

Scholastic Aristotelianism is a philosophical trend that scores high on both counts. The divergences between scholastic thinkers are immense but what these thinkers have in common is the conviction that an analysis of the world and of ourselves as knowing subjects and moral beings, while perhaps starting with what we daily perceive and think, will soon lead away from this common world, introducing all kinds of entities and corresponding vocabulary: form and matter, act and potency, universals, transcendentals, predicables, substantial and accidental forms, formal distinctions, intentions, species, active and potential intellect, categories, all kinds of distinctions in the analysis of language and argumentation, and so on – it makes reading scholastic authors philosophically immensely rewarding but often also very difficult and puzzling. What is true for almost any kind of theorizing is certainly true for the

¹ Pasnau (2011), 115.

scholastic way of philosophizing: concepts require new concepts, and to clarify these new concepts still other concepts have to be introduced, and so on. The higher we come in this conceptual building the less we feel that we are still in the process of analyzing our initial object of study. It has become a game on its own, and even a highly sympathetic interpreter of scholastic thought such as Robert Pasnau must admit that “one risk this kind of analysis runs is that we will end up not just up to our necks in metaphysical parts, but positively drowning – that once we begin to postulate such entities, we will be forced to postulate infinitely many more.” We might think “that nothing of any explanatory value has been achieved by all this philosophizing.”² It is indeed “the timeless complaint made of all philosophy.”

It was certainly a complaint voiced passionately by Renaissance humanists and early-modern philosophers alike. They indeed thought that the scholastics had erected a conceptual building that was out of tune with its function and purpose. In this article I will study some moments in this long tradition of language critique. There are several reasons why this is an interesting theme worthwhile to explore. First, the critique of philosophical language is a clear example of continuity between Renaissance and early-modern thinkers: not only were early-modern thinkers indebted to scholastic traditions – a historical fact widely acknowledged – but also to Renaissance humanism, a debt that is far less often recognized and appreciated by modern scholars. This critique of scholastic language is one of the factors that contributed to the demise of scholastic Aristotelianism, hence it is interesting to study how it developed in the period between, let’s say, Petrarch and Leibniz. When Leibniz, for instance, claimed that in language “Der Gebrauch ist der Meister” ([linguistic]usage is the master) he repeated in the same words a common humanist point that philosophical language should follow the common language of the people though, as we will see, what was understood by “common language” shifted over the years.

This also suggests another reason why this is an interesting theme. Historians of philosophy have often dismissed the humanist critique of scholastic language as merely polemical and rhetorical, and as philosophically superficial and ill-informed.³ Such a dismissal is understandable given the sometimes highly polemical nature of the humanists’ invectives – a genre that was of course not meant to engage in deep philosophical argument. But behind the polemics a serious and age-old philosophical question looms large: What kind of language should be used in philosophy (and indeed in any kind of intellectual pursuit,

² Pasnau (2011), 211 and 210 (on Scotus’s analysis of the inherence of accidents in a substance).

³ For discussion see Nauta (2009), 211-212.

including science)? Should we use the common language of the people or is this far too imprecise and should we develop our own technical vocabulary? If we plea for the first, then we will have to make clear what we mean by “common” (or the “ordinary”), “the people,” “common usage” and so on, and also why this usage should be normative in our philosophizing. If we accept a technical language on the other hand, we must make clear, ideally, why common language does not suffice, and what the relationship is between this technical terminology and our common, non-technical language.⁴ Seen from this perspective, the criticisms leveled against the scholastics raise philosophically pertinent and wide-ranging questions.

In what follows I can discuss only a small number of thinkers, from Lorenzo Valla to Leibniz, and many interesting and even major figures have to be left out of the picture (e.g. Petrarch, Agricola, Pico, Ramus, Cardano, Campanella, and Descartes). Nor can I pay attention, within the scope of this article, to related debates, for instance, on Ciceronianism, or on the *questione della lingua* (on Latin versus the vernacular), or on later seventeenth-century attempts to construct a universal language (e.g. George Dalgarno and John Wilkins), let alone to debates and controversies that informed their positions. But the authors I will discuss sometimes refer to each other, and the earlier ones were among the (admittedly) many authors read, consulted, or at least known to early-modern philosophers such as Gassendi, Hobbes, and Leibniz. Thus Valla is mentioned by Vives, and Vives by Sanches, and these Renaissance thinkers helped Gassendi, as he tells us, to break away from the Aristotelian-scholastic tradition. Between Valla and Hobbes some affinities have been detected. And omnivorous reader as he was, Leibniz had read many Renaissance authors, including Valla, and he had edited the work of the humanist Mario Nizolio, who in his turn was indebted to, among others, Valla, Agricola, and Vives. There are no straight lines of influence in history – the concept of influence is of course notoriously difficult to define – but a recognizable track can be discerned (or, at least, can be cleared) in the forest of Renaissance and early-modern texts.

Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457)

Before Lorenzo Valla came on the scene in the 1430s, humanists such as Petrarch, Salutati, and Leonardo Bruni had already complained about the Latin of the scholastics, a language that they found ugly, ungrammatical and a far cry from the beautiful Latin that they wanted to

⁴ For a modern discussion see Hanfling (2000).

revive and reinstall as language for communication, and literary and scholarly pursuits.⁵ Their critique was primarily of a rhetorical kind. When Leonardo Bruni, for instance, criticized the scholastic translator of Aristotle's *Ethics* (whom we know was Robert Grosseteste, an identification unknown to Bruni), he focused on the lack of beauty of the translation: Greek words had been left untranslated in the translation, Latin words were used with different meanings than they had in classical Latin, and the clumsy style did not match Aristotle's copious and eloquent style.⁶ A good translator must know both the source and the target language very well, a requirement the medieval translator clearly did not meet. Bruni's harsh words provoked a response from bishop Alfonso of Cartagena who defended style and terminology of the medieval translation. Though being primarily a debate on translation, it addressed the issue of philosophical language: should we give priority to rhetorical eloquence or to technical precision? All these categories were matters of contention, and Bruni would not recognize the validity of the opposition, claiming precision and exactness for his rhetorical approach, concerned with using words in the right context with their right meaning.

This debate on the language of philosophy was given powerful though controversial expression by Lorenzo Valla, who in his *Dialectical Disputations* subjected some core notions of Aristotelianism to a withering critique. While he presented himself as an orator, Valla was concerned with semantic precision rather than with the beauty of style: the term *elegantia* meaning first and foremost semantic precision.⁷ Valla's profound studies of the Latin language and his vast reading in classical and post-classical works convinced him that the meaning of words and the use of grammatical constructions can be learnt only by careful observation of linguistic practice, that is, how classical authors had actually used language. Meaning is to be determined by linguistic usage (*consuetudo*), and for Valla this meant the usage of the great authors, the *auctoritates*, roughly from Cicero to Quintilian. It was during these two centuries that Latin reached its peak, and while it continued to be used far and wide and for many centuries to come, Valla saw a gradual decline in the knowledge of good Latin, going downhill with Boethius's philosophical Latin, not to speak of what Valla regarded as the barbarous gibberish of the medieval scholastics.⁸ This had disastrous effects on the arts and sciences, and especially for philosophy and theology where everything depends on

⁵ The literature is vast; for some excellent general works see Seigel (1968); Witt (2000); Rummel (2000); Wels (2000).

⁶ Bruni in Griffiths et al. (1987), 213-229; Botley (2004), 41-62.

⁷ Marsh (1979), 101-103.

⁸ Moss (2003), 36-37; Camporeale (1972), 181-182; Nauta (2007), 195-198.

words.⁹ This is a prominent theme of the *Dialectical Disputations* in which Valla used linguistic usage as one of his main principles to attack Aristotelian-scholastic philosophy and logic. Thus, from a predominantly linguistic point of view, he criticized the ten Aristotelian categories, the six transcendental terms, important Aristotelian distinctions such as matter/form and act/potency, as well as what he thought the useless and abstract logic of the scholastics that had nothing to do with how people actually spoke, argued, and reasoned.

We may group Valla's criticisms in the following categories:¹⁰

(i) *Ungrammatical terms*. As is well known, Valla rejects terms such as "entitas," "haecceitas," "identitas," "quiditas," "iditas," "reitas" and "perseitas," since they are incorrectly formed. They cannot be formed from substantives such as "ens" and from pronouns such as "quid," nor from adjectives (with some exceptions).

(ii) *Superfluous terms*. While perhaps grammatically correct, many scholastic terms, especially those standing for categories and transcendentals, are superfluous. Transcendental terms such as "something," "one," "true," "good" and "being" are superfluous; "something" is nothing but "a certain thing" (*aliqua res*), "one" can be reduced to "one thing," "true" to "a true thing," "good" to "a good thing" and "being" to "that thing which is (*ea res quae est*).¹¹ Likewise, many of the nine accidental categories of Aristotle are superfluous and can be reduced to quality and action. Such qualifications as size, relationship, position and time do not differ from qualifications that refer to qualities such as white or smart: "big," "brother," "armed," "in the house," and so forth all qualify a person or thing; from a grammatical point of view they are essentially qualitative terms. Valla's basic assumption seems to be that the categories should reflect or point to things in the world, and he therefore has no need for other categories than substance, quality and action, referring to a thing, how it is qualified and what it does or undergoes. Clearly, the grammatical categories of noun, adjective and verb lie behind these ontological categories.

(iii) *Words taken out of context*. Valla is in particular sensitive to this point. It is, for instance, an abuse of words to say that the senses are "being acted upon (*patis*) by an object," or that the soul is moved or is self-moving, or that inanimate things have a final cause. He also thinks one cannot apply the matter/form distinction to God nor to the sun, with which God is

⁹ "Omnis enim huiusmodi questio, qua se philosophi theologique disputando torquent, de vocabulo est;" Valla (1982), 405.

¹⁰ My examples come from Valla (2012), vol. 1, 54-62 (*haecceitas* etc.), 18-36 and 62-70 (transcendental terms), 276 (*patis*), 88 (*materia*), 270 (*prior*), 32 (*one*), 240 (*empty*); vol. 2, 18-142 (markers), 126-142 (modality); more examples are discussed in Nauta (2009), *passim*.

compared: both God and the sun should be said to have an essence plus the qualities vibration, light and heat. (Valla almost takes the analogy between the Sun and the Trinity literally, speaking of “persons” of the Sun’s essence.) He criticizes the application of “prior” and “prius” to a number of expressions found in scholastic literature such as “prior and posterior in nature,” “the whole is prior to the part,” “genus is prior to species.” Many more examples could be given.

(iv) *Arbitrary restriction on the meaning or application of a term.* Valla’s criticized, e.g., Aristotle’s statement that one is not a number but the principle of number. Similarly, to say that a vessel can never be “empty” since there is always air in it, is an absurd restriction on the terms “full/empty” and “place.”

(v) *Oversimplification and arbitrary restriction on a range of words.* Closely related to the previous point is Valla’s criticism of the rather arbitrary restriction to a limited set of words in scholastic philosophy. Scholastics reduce the markers of quantity and quality to only a few, namely “all,” “some,” “none,” and “no one,” while Latin has a far richer arsenal of such words. Similarly, scholastics usually treat only the following six terms as modals: “possible,” “impossible,” “true,” “false,” “necessary,” and “contingent.” But again Latin is much more resourceful in expressing modality.

Valla thus aims at showing how Latin words – nouns, verbs, pronouns, and so on – were used and hence should properly be used, not only in literary studies and our own writings, but also in philosophy and other intellectual and literary pursuits. What he suggests then is that, once we create our own language or use words out of their “normal” context, we get a distorted picture of reality, that is, we will be searching for referents of these terms, or we will raise questions only because we have taken a metaphor literally or because we have applied a term outside its common domain. Valla’s humanist assumption is of course that classical Latin should be our yardstick, because this is, according to him, the common, natural language in comparison to which post-classical forms of Latin and *a fortiori* the jargon of the scholastics can only appear as corrupt, deprived, distorted, unnatural, and artificial – words that abound in Valla’s writings.¹¹ For us it is difficult to regard classical Latin as a common, normal, let alone ordinary language but, as I have pointed out elsewhere, this is how Valla indeed regarded it, especially when he compared it to the Latin of the scholastics. It was certainly the Latin of great authorities such as Cicero and Quintilian that constituted the norm of linguistic usage, but Latin had spread far and wide and had been used over a long period of

¹¹ Nauta (2009), 274-279.

time, so that for a humanist it could easily be regarded as the normal language, in opposition to scholastic Latin that was considered to be technical, artificial and “unnatural.”

Valla’s programme of ontological reduction was inspired and driven by his grammatical-rhetorical approach. It inspired – directly or indirectly – many later humanists as well as early modern philosophers such as Gassendi, Hobbes, and Leibniz.

Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540)

One of the most influential humanists whose position was much indebted to Valla is Juan Luis Vives. In his famous letter *Against the Pseudodialecticians* he takes up several themes we have already met in Valla: the importance of linguistic usage, the appeal to the common language of the people as a *sine qua non* for effective communication, the rejection of technical jargon, and so on. Vives had studied with the Parisian logicians, so more than Valla he knew what he was talking about when he polemically analysed late-scholastic sophisms. Just as for Valla, for Vives classical Latin was a storehouse of learning and erudition. To create one’s own jargon, as the philosophers do, is to make communication impossible. Communication requires the use of one language, and access to one common source of learning:¹²

if we all profess a Latin logic, words will have the meaning established by Latin practice and usage, not our own. It is unbecoming and foolish in Latin logic to use Getic or Sarmatian words, or not even those, but words belonging to no nation, which we have conjured up ourselves. Indeed, I should very much like to hear from these men: if they were to teach dialectic in Spanish or French, which is as feasible as in Latin or Greek, would they make up rules as they please rather than take them from the structure of the language itself?

The rules which the dialecticians derive from their own brand of Latin are not necessarily valid for other languages. But if we choose to use Latin in logic and communication, we should not make up the rules ourselves nor assign meanings arbitrarily, but rather stick to convention and linguistic usage.

¹² Vives (1979), 67. See Nauta (forthcoming).

But if they would not be willing to accept rules from conventional discourse to teach logic in other languages, why do they want to exercise this tyranny over the language of the free Roman people, and force it to accept rules of speech from men as uncultivated and barbarian as themselves?¹³

To this question philosophers often give the answer that they speak “rigorously” (*de rigore*): making a distinction between “good,” “common” or “everyday sense” and an “exact,” “rigorous,” or “philosophical” sense, they thus create room for themselves to uphold the truth of their claims (mainly in logic) that in everyday speech would be false, e.g. “You are not a man.” But Vives thinks this self-acclaimed freedom is false. For him rigor can only mean “this very appropriateness, this distinct, innate, and genuine force, the right and true meaning of Latin discourse,” which can be learnt only from good Latin authors.¹⁴ We see here the same conflation of the learned language of the great authors with the common language of the people (the “free Roman people” in the quotation just given) as we saw in Valla.¹⁵ But this conflation as well as the identification of “rigor” with “the right and true meaning of Latin discourse,” is problematic. The uneducated masses, Vives says, sometimes use expressions that, strictly speaking, are not correct:

Every language has its own appropriateness of speech, which the Greeks call *idioma*. Words have their own meaning, their own force, which the uneducated masses sometimes misuse.¹⁶

Vives then quotes from Cicero who had given some examples, also referred to by Valla, e.g. that the common people say “the vessel is empty,” while strictly speaking this is not true; it still contains air. Valla was adamant in holding that everyday sense rather than the exact sense of philosophers should be the norm, and Vives wants to maintain the same, yet he also admits that “the better educated make some concessions to the common people in the use of language; among themselves they think and speak in a different manner.”¹⁷ (As, for instance,

¹³ Ibid., 67-69.

¹⁴ Ibid., 69-71.

¹⁵ On the distinction between exact and common manner of speaking, see Valla (2012), 266 (*populus an philosophus*); Nauta (2009), 108.

¹⁶ Vives (1979), 69.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Bishop Berkeley was later to say: thinking with the learned, and speaking with the vulgar.) But to distinguish this situation – in which a normal word such as “empty” does not describe the facts correctly – from the jargon of the scholastics, he adds “though not to any great extent and mostly on abstruse and philosophical subjects which the people would not be in a position to know as precisely as the philosophers understand them.” This seems to support the idea that philosophers may have their own “exact” way of speaking, but such freedom is apparently not allowed to scholastic logicians, who go far over the top in inventing rules of logic that allow them to say that “You are not a man” is, strictly speaking true (i.e. according to their rules).

Vives’s position is somewhat ambiguous then. On the one hand, the common people sometimes misuse language, but the example of the vessel suggests that this misuse *is* actually not a misuse at all but rather the common way of talking (hence *consuetudo*), and moreover that this common way of talking *is* rigorous in Vives’s sense of the word, namely proper and good Latin. Vives probably wants to make the point that “common language” does not always capture the facts right (the vessel is not really empty), though for the purpose of communication, in ordinary contexts, it is adequate because it captures our common sense feeling or perception of the matter (we see that the vessel is empty). Several issues seem to get mixed up here then.

Apart from the in-crowd character of scholastic language, it is also essentialistic, Vives thinks. It seems to lay bare the deep structure of reality that Vives, as a moderate sceptic, believes is impossible to know. We cannot know the essences of things: “what knowledge we have gained can only be reckoned as probable and not assumed as absolutely true.”¹⁸ All we can do is observe carefully the outer aspects of things (qualities, actions, their similarities with other things etc.), and from a careful comparison establish general patterns and laws, which however must remain provisional. Many scholastics would agree with this, as they also turned away from substance and essence, moving toward an examination – or at least a defense of such an approach – of sensible qualities.¹⁹ But in Vives this move is closely connected to a reform of language. As he writes, in metaphysics the philosopher should have a good knowledge of language, for it is “the common meaning of words” rather than the technical terminology of the scholastics that should be followed (*communis verborum usus; sensus communis; verbis de vulgo sumtis*). Strange as it may seem, metaphysics is for Vives a discipline that must take its starting-point from common usage, laying bare (*enucleare*) the

¹⁸ Vives (1971), 166-67. See Casini 2009.

¹⁹ Pasnau (2011), 115-134, and 634-635.

meaning of individual words, since “the rise and disappearance of nearly all problems in the disciplines are dependent on the way we phrase them in language.”²⁰ Indeed, language is a shaping force: “the power of almost all knowing and understanding lies in words; for in words are perceptions (*sensa*) registered, and all that takes place in the mind and in thought is expressed in words.”²¹ When properly combined words will give us, “as far as possible,” a description (*explicatio*) of the nature of whatever thing. And for him, as for Valla, it was classical Latin that serves us best in expressing our view of the world of observable phenomena.

Francisco Sanches (1550/51-1623)

The same intrinsic connection between a sceptic-empirical outlook and a critique of scholastic language can be found in the work of the Portuguese scholar, Francisco Sanches, who mentions Vives a few times. Sanches’ *Quod nihil scitur*, first published in 1581, is well known as a skeptical treatise that aims at refuting what Sanches thinks are the pretensions of philosophers to arrive at the truth of things.²² He is in particular very critical of the Aristotelian theory of scientific demonstration. It is a system based on definitions and demonstrations, not on observation of the facts, on *res*: “for other sciences are based on facts, whereas this one is a subtle invention, and quite useless – or rather most harmful inasmuch as it distracts me from the observation of facts and keeps me engaged in the study of itself.”²³ Their system of logic prevents them seeing the facts (*res*): “They know nothing but a multitude of syllogistic inferences – no facts at all.”²⁴ This is a running theme in Sanches, who was influenced by Galenic writings in which we find a strong emphasis on the observation of facts and the importance of ordinary life experience;²⁵ hence, unsurprisingly, the word “*res*” abounds in Sanches’ work. As he says in the address to the reader: “I would address myself to those who, ‘not bound by an oath of fidelity to any master’s words’, assess the facts for themselves, under the guidance of sense-perception and reason.”²⁶ This indeed

²⁰ *De prima philosophia* I, in Vives (1782-90; repr. London, 1964), vol. 3, 193.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² On Sanches’s debt to humanists such as Vives and Erasmus, see Limbrick in Sanches (1988), 28-36, but see also Howald’s cautious remarks in Sanches (2007), ciii, and Lupoli (2009).

²³ Sanches (1988), 103 (Latin)/186 (English).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104/189.

²⁵ On ancient empiricism, see Frede (1987). On Sanches’s affinity to it, see Caluori (2007).

²⁶ Sanches (1988), 92/168.

could have been the words of Valla and Vives too. And like them, Sanches sees a close connection between the language of the philosophers and their claims to truth and certainty:²⁷

They distort words from their commonly accepted meanings (*a propria significatione*), and corrupt them in order to have another language of their own, quite different from their mother-tongue, yet the same. And when you go to them in order to learn something, they change the meanings of the words you had hitherto employed, in such a way that these no longer denote the same objects – that is, objects in the natural world – but instead the objects that they themselves have invented.

Greek terms such as “entelecheia” and Latin terms such as “essentia,” “quidditas” and “corporeitas” have no meaning at all, he says, and “can be neither understood nor explained by anyone – much less rendered into everyday speech (*sermo vulgaris*), which is accustomed to assign only to *real* things (but not to invented things) names of their own.”²⁸ The idea behind such an alleged exclusivity of Latin or Greek is that such a language has a particular efficacy to express the nature of things. Sanches rejects this idea, suggesting that languages, including Greek and Latin, have changed continuously: “Therefore there lies in words no power to explain the nature of things, except that which they derive from the arbitrary decision of him who applies them.”²⁹ And it is popular usage, as he says elsewhere in his treatise, that determines meaning: “the meanings of words appear to depend, for the most part or wholly, on popular usage (*a vulgo*); and here, accordingly, is where we must look for them; for who but the populace (*vulgus*) taught us how to speak?”³⁰

Sanches realizes however that there is no fixity and stability in the common language of the people either. Every question, every issue depends on words,³¹ and words do not have fixed meanings: whatever meaning we give to words, these words will never be able to disclose the nature of things. In his commentary on Galen’s *De differentiis morborum* he remarks that “Galen was right in striving to take the meaning of health and sickness from common linguistic usage (*a communi loquendi usu*); for linguistic usage (*consuetudo*) as well

²⁷ Sanches (1988), 119/216-217.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 121/219.

³⁰ Ibid., 97/177.

³¹ Ibid., 101/183 (“almost every enquiry is about a name”); cf. 95-96/174; 97/177, and elsewhere.

as the will (*voluntas*) of people gives speech its signification (*vim*).”³² But this also represents a serious problem for the sciences (*scientiis*), Sanches continues

since the populace (*populus*) does not use words appropriately nor does it understand the things referred to by those words, for while it speaks of health, it does not know at all what it is. Hence medical doctors, who understand or nearly understand the matter (*res*), are forced to use words in a different way than the populace does, or to use words with a different meaning (*ad alia significata transferre*) or, even, impose new meanings (*nova imponere*) after consultation of Galen, Cicero and other writers.³³

It seems then that what is forbidden to philosophers – inventing new words, or using words in a different way than common people do – is allowed to the medical doctors and practitioners of other crafts and professions, but of course the latter follow the correct authorities, Cicero and Galen.

The passage just cited complicates matters somewhat and shows how flexible (or ambiguous) phrases such as “common linguistic usage” and “the populace” are. Standing in the tradition of Galen and ancient empiricism, Sanches seems to defend ordinary life experience and the experience of professionals based on observation; hence common language should be the rule. But on the other hand, compared to medical professionals, the “common people” (*vulgus*) are not always a reliable guide to understanding the phenomena. But in spite of what Sanches suggests in this passage, namely that Cicero is an important authority for the use of words in a profession such as medicine, in *Quod nihil scitur* he dissociates himself from the rhetorical and polished style of Cicero and his followers: “You are not to look in me for an elegant, polished style (...) If that is what you want, seek it from Cicero, whose function it is; I shall speak prettily enough if I speak truly enough.”³⁴ Elegant language, he says, “is seemingly for rhetoricians, poets, courtiers, lovers, harlots, pimps, flatterers, parasites, and people of that sort, for whom elegant speech is an end in itself.”

Thus next to the similarities already mentioned, we also see clear differences between Sanches and humanists such as Valla and Vives: while the humanists still thought of a close intrinsic connection between elegance on the one hand and clear and truthful language on the

³² Ibid., 177 n. 34; my translation.

³³ Ibid.; my translation.

³⁴ Ibid., 171 for this and the next quotation.

other, Sanches no longer believes in such a bond.³⁵ Nor does he regard Latin (and hence the linguistic usage of the great Latin authorities) as a *sine qua non* for philosophizing and doing science. We need a sober, clear, unpolished language, avoiding both technical jargon and rhetorical elegance. This view was endorsed by many early-modern philosophers: with the rise of the new science sober, unaffected language became an asset for most philosophers.

Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655)

Gassendi is a good example of an early-modern philosopher whose views are indebted, not only to ancient sources such as Sextus Empiricus and Diogenes Laertius, but also to his humanist predecessors; modern scholars have even called him a “mitigated humanist.”³⁶ He himself is quite explicit about his debts, stating that it was the reading of Renaissance authors such as Vives, Charron, Ramus, and Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, that made him realize that “there was nothing wrong in supposing that this sect [of the Aristotelians] was not necessarily correct in all matters just because most men approved of it.”³⁷ They showed him the importance of the *libertas philosophandi*, which often meant, as a first step, the liberty to attack Aristotelian-scholastic philosophy, and this is what Gassendi does in his first major work, *Exercitationes Paradoxicae adversus Aristoteleos*. Covering much the same ground as his Renaissance predecessors, Gassendi criticizes Aristotelian philosophy (logic, physics, natural philosophy, metaphysics, ethics), saying in words that remind us of Valla’s, that he selected “just those opinions which were, so to speak, foundational doctrines of the Aristotelians.”³⁸ Referring also to Valla’s program of ontological reduction, Gassendi attacks the Aristotelian categories, the transcendental terms, and rejects Aristotelian logic and theory of demonstration as “artificial” and useless. In fact, in the words of a modern scholar he seems to attack the Aristotelians for “asking philosophical questions” at all, which illustrates “the

³⁵ Lupoli (2009), 151 sees even “that (intrinsically anti-humanistic) resetting pattern (...) of philosophical reflection which was to characterize the Cartesian or ‘modern’ approach to philosophy in the seventeenth century.”

³⁶ Osler (2003), 41. On a comparison between the humanism of Valla and Gassendi see Joy (1987).

³⁷ Gassendi (1972), 18. Cf. his Letter to du Faur de Pibrac, in *ibid.* 5. Vives is mentioned also in Gassendi (1658), III, 119. Cf. Murr (1992) and Maclean (2006), esp. 264-267 on *libertas philosophandi*.

³⁸ Gassendi (1972), 26. Cf. one of the titles of Valla’s *Dialectical Disputations: Retractatio totius dialecticae cum fundamentis universae philosophiae*.

difficulty, for an early seventeenth-century intellectual, in articulating just what was wrong with scholastic philosophy, and what ought to replace it.”³⁹

What Gassendi was to propose as a replacement, namely a Christianized version of the Epicurean system, need not detain us here. More relevant, though hardly surprising, is the fact that Gassendi appealed to “the common and accepted manner of speaking (*communis et protritius loquendi usus*)” that we have to employ in philosophy.⁴⁰ Of course, this no longer implies a Ciceronian or classical style, and concerning his own “style and manner of expression,” Gassendi says that he is “neither Ciceronian nor the least bit scholastic,” favoring “an unaffected (*illaboratum*) prose style which flows spontaneously.”⁴¹ Elsewhere he praises ancient authors who knew how to draw the attention from their audience, combining the useful with the agreeable in a pleasant prose style.⁴² We should not strive for a grand style, but philosophers who have claimed that “solecisms are praiseworthy, and are the gems of philosophers” are to be despised: a decent style (*honestus cultus*) fits the philosopher, and “even the abstruse things can be presented in a decorous way (*cum ornatu*).”⁴³ The wording is vitally important, Gassendi writes, and debates on matters always turn out to be debates on words; if we do not use the proper meaning of words (*sermonis proprietatem*) we end up making our own idiosyncratic speech, that is, philosophical jargon. Like Valla and Vives, he thinks that the so-called “rigor” of the philosophers can only be defined in terms of the common and accepted manner of speaking, which he seems to equate here with the Latin of authorities such as Cicero and Livy.⁴⁴

Much has been written on Gassendi’s philosophy and his skepticism, called by Richard Popkin “constructive scepticism” or “mitigated scepticism,” which he says “represents a new way, possibly the closest to contemporary empirical and pragmatic methods, of dealing with the abyss of doubt that the crisis of the Reformation and the

³⁹ Pasnau (2011), 93-94.

⁴⁰ *Exercitationes paradoxicae adversus Aristoteleos*, in Gassendi (1658), III, 151B.

⁴¹ Gassendi (1658), III, 103; trans. Gassendi (1972), 27.

⁴² Gassendi (1658), III, 110A.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “Quod vero interdum respondent loquendum esse *ad rigorem*, prorsus non diffiteor: quando sic apposite, vel nescientes, nominant suam illam insipidam marcidamque frigiditatem. Certe si cum tanto rigore isti Latine loquuntur, parum est M. Tullius, vel T. Livius loquutus Latine.” (110B). Gassendi also gives here an etymology of “res” that he may have derived from Valla (“res” from “reor, reris,” or from “ratus, rata, ratum”); Valla (2012), 124.

scientific revolution had opened up.”⁴⁵ Popkin describes this position as the “realization that the doubts propounded by the Pyrrhonists in no way affected *la verité des sciences*, provided that the sciences were interpreted as hypothetical systems about appearances and not true descriptions of reality, as practical guides to actions and not ultimate information about the true nature of things.” Here too, however, we might point to Renaissance authors, and in particular Vives who had already formulated a philosophy that combines a sceptical attitude towards knowledge of the essences of things with a pragmatic empiricism.⁴⁶ As we have noted, Vives often emphasizes the importance of careful observation and the risks of hasty conclusions, though he would not have shared Gassendi’s love for Epicureanism.⁴⁷

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

Friend of Gassendi, brilliant stylist and author of one of the most beautiful philosophical prose works written in English, the *Leviathan*, Hobbes too had no patience with the Aristotelian-scholastic philosophy of the schools and their language. If scholastic philosophers were forced to translate their barbarous, “insignificant speech” into the vernacular of the common people, we would immediately see, Hobbes suggests, how ridiculous and nonsensical it is.⁴⁸ They hide their confusion, ignorance or downright stupidity behind a fog of incomprehensible and obscure Latin and Greek words. They call the Lord, e.g., with a Latin or Latinized word “*verbum*,” which sounds impressive, but when translated into ordinary French, “parole,” gives something rather absurd.⁴⁹ Just try, Hobbes says, to translate a title of a chapter from the work of Suarez into “any of the modern tongues, so as to make the same intelligible; or into any tolerable Latin, such as they were acquainted withal, that lived when the Latin tongue was vulgar: ‘The first cause does not necessarily inflow any thing into the second, by force of the essential subordination of the second causes, by which it may help it to work.’”⁵⁰ This is nonsensical speech, certainly not the normal speech of man: “the common sort of men (...) seldom speak insignificantly.”

⁴⁵ Popkin (2003), 125 for this and the following quotation. Osler (2003), 32 argues that Gassendi’s voluntarism led him to deny essences and necessary connections.

⁴⁶ Cf. a similar position in Campanella’s *Metaphysica*, as discussed by Paganini (2009).

⁴⁷ See e.g. Vives (1971), 31 and 125 (expressing a negative view of Epicurus).

⁴⁸ Hobbes (1994), 21; I also refer to the new and definitive edition of the *Leviathan*: Hobbes (2012), 60. For a comprehensive treatment see Isermann (1991). See also Leijenhorst (2002).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46 and Hobbes (2012), 122.

Such criticisms was commonplace by now, but Hobbes transcends his humanist predecessors in giving a rather detailed analysis of insignificant speech: “insignificant sounds,” he says, are of two sorts: “One when they are new, and yet their meaning not explained by definition; whereof there have been abundance coined by schoolmen, and puzzled philosophers. Another, when men make a name of two names, whose significations are contradictory and inconsistent.”⁵¹ Examples of this latter kind are “incorporeal body,” or “incorporeal substance.” As he explains:

For whensoever any affirmation is false, the two names of which it is composed, put together and made one, signify nothing at all. For example, if it be a false affirmation to say *a quadrangle is round*, the word *round quadrangle* signifies nothing, but is a mere sound. So likewise, if it be false to say that virtue can be poured, or blown up and down, the words *in-poured virtue*, *in-blown virtue*, are as absurd and insignificant as *a round quadrangle*.

In the next chapter he develops this point by explaining how absurdities arise when we mix up words that belong to different categories, for example, when we give names of bodies to accidents, or vice versa (“faith is infused or inspired,” “extension is body,” “phantasms are spirits”), or when we give names of bodies to names or speeches (“there be things universal,” “a living creature is genus, or a general thing”), or names of accidents to names and speeches (“a man’s command is his will”).⁵² Another cause of “absurd conclusions” is “the use of metaphors, tropes, and other rhetorical figures, instead of words proper,” which – though lawful in common speech – should not be admitted in the “reckoning and seeking of truth,” that is in science and philosophy. A last source mentioned by Hobbes is the use of names “that signify nothing, but are taken up, and learned by rote from the schools, as *hypostatical*, *transubstantiate*, *consubstantiate*, *eternal-now*, and the like canting of schoolmen.” By the standards of Hobbes’s own materialistic philosophy, many things turn out to be absurd such as “incorporeal substance” or “incorporeal body,” and his inclusion of the terms just quoted (and also “free will” since a person can be free, but not his will) clearly reveals Hobbes’s ultimate aim, namely to criticize a number of philosophical and theological doctrines on

⁵¹ Hobbes (1994), 21; Hobbes (2012), 60.

⁵² Hobbes (1994), 24-25; Hobbes (2012), 68-70; probably adapted from a similar listing in Hobbes’s *De corpore* I.v.3-9.

transubstantiation, the soul, separate essences, the Trinity – doctrines which he finds dangerous for the stability of the commonwealth. This critique forms the *basso continuo* of Part IV of the *Leviathan*.

It has puzzled scholars that Hobbes recommends a proper, that is, non-figurative language in philosophy and science, because his own style abounds with metaphors and rhetorical tropes. But for Hobbes rhetoric was essentially a matter of style and presentation, but never part of the production of true knowledge and the construction of science. Science requires definitions, deductions and demonstrative reasoning, in which there is no place for metaphors and rhetorical embellishments.⁵³

It is not difficult to point to similarities between Hobbes and Renaissance critics of scholastic Aristotelianism. Gianni Paganini has suggested that “the affinity is undeniable between the philological-linguistic argument defended in *Elegantiae* and *Disputationes*, on the one hand, and the many passages of the Appendix [to the Latin *Leviathan*] and the *Leviathan* itself,” and more in particular that it is “very probable” that Valla was a source for Hobbes’s daring views on the Trinity.⁵⁴ As author with a more than solid background in Renaissance humanist culture, Hobbes was surely indebted to a long tradition of Renaissance anti-Aristotelianism in which Valla was an important (early) voice, and Reformation authors referred to Valla’s treatise against the authenticity of the Donation of Constantine. There is no evidence, however, that Hobbes had read Valla’s *Disputationes*.⁵⁵ Important debates and controversies on religious and political matters had taken place in the two centuries that separate them – debates that enriched Hobbes’s understanding and exegesis of these theological doctrines.⁵⁶ Moreover, there are important differences between the two thinkers, not only in their view of God, matter, body, soul and so on, but also in their linguistic approach. Hobbes’s solution to the “insignificant speech” is of course not a return to classical Latin nor does he argue that the common language of the people is always correct. For Hobbes the solution lies in defining one’s terms very carefully and avoiding the combination of words that belong to different categories. Moreover, Hobbes’s own definitions of terms and

⁵³ Nauta (2002).

⁵⁴ Paganini (2003), 211.

⁵⁵ In private correspondence Noel Malcolm writes to me that in his transcriptions of the Hardwick Hall library catalogues he cannot find any reference to any work by Valla except his Latin translation of Thucydides. Of course, one would expect a well-educated man such as Hobbes to have encountered the *Elegantiae* at some stage, but still Malcolm sees no distinctive debt to it in Hobbes’s writings.

⁵⁶ See Sommerville (1992), ch. 5 and 6; Malcolm in Hobbes (2012), vol. 1, 45-47, 106, 181-82.

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concepts do not always reflect common usage but aim at reforming usage, often with the purpose of bringing them more in tune with the ultimate political aim he had in mind.⁵⁷ Valla does not distinguish between such categories. He did not share Hobbes's love for geometry, definitions, deductions and proofs. Valla's notion of linguistic usage (*consuetudo*) is defined in terms of the Latin of the great classical authors, an ideal that is certainly not central to Hobbes, who often criticizes these authors for having failed to understand the nature of morality and politics.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716)

A philosopher who undoubtedly knew the work of Valla (viz. his dialogue on free will) was Leibniz, but it is in critical dialogue with a follower of Valla, the sixteenth-century humanist Mario Nizolio, that Leibniz developed his views on the requirements of clear speech and philosophical language. The Ciceronian Nizolio had published his *On the true principles and the true manner of philosophizing against the pseudophilosophers* in 1553. This work contains a radical critique of the ontology and conceptual armory of the scholastics, and in particular of universals, which Nizolio believed were accepted by virtually all philosophical schools except the nominalists.

In the preface to his edition, Leibniz discusses philosophical style. He shares a principle endorsed by Nizolio that “whatever cannot be explained in popular terms is nothing and should be exorcised from philosophy as if by an incantation, unless it can be known by immediate sense experience.”⁵⁸ Like Nizolio, Leibniz thinks that the “passion for devising abstract words has almost obfuscated philosophy for us entirely.” As we want to communicate our thoughts we must be very clear in our language: “the greatest clarity is found in commonplace terms with their popular usage retained.” Since “usage is master” (*der Gebrauch ist der Meister*), Leibniz is sceptical about linguistic innovation, and he warns against assigning meaning to philosophical terms “which are not in conformity with usage from which one should not stray easily in writings intended for the common man.”⁵⁹ Technical terms are therefore to be shunned “as worse than dog or snake, and one must abstain particularly from those words for categories which are far removed from Latin

⁵⁷ Curley in Hobbes (1994), x.

⁵⁸ For this and the following quotation see Leibniz (1969), 124, 126, 123. For an analysis of Nizolio's work see Nauta (2012).

⁵⁹ Quoted by Laerke (2009), 942 n. 25.

usage.”⁶⁰ Yet Leibniz also realizes that technical terms cannot always be avoided “because of the prolixity which would result if popular terms were always used.” In geometry e.g. “popular usage does not exactly fit the concepts of geometry.” But technical terms, which can be convenient and handsome abbreviations of much longer descriptions in non-technical language, must ultimately be reducible to common terms. As Leibniz concludes:⁶¹

There is certainly nothing which cannot be expressed in popular terms, at least by using many of them. Hence Nizolius rightly urges that anything be regarded as nonexistent, fictitious, and useless to which there cannot be assigned a word in the vernacular, however general; that is, as I interpret him, a word which joined together with other general words can express the matter.

Just like Hobbes, Leibniz argues that terms “ought to involve either no figures of speech or few and apt ones.”⁶² He criticizes the scholastics in particular, because “strange though this sounds, their speech abounds with figures. What else are such terms as *to depend*, *to inhere*, *to emanate* and *to inflow*?” And again like Hobbes, he gives as example Suarez’ term “influx,” which is metaphorical and more obscure than what it defines, viz. “cause.” But it is not only the scholastics who use obscure language. In other letters and writings Leibniz frequently says that Descartes and especially Spinoza often used obscure terms and definitions.⁶³

But while sharing Nizolio’s plea for a common language in philosophizing, Leibniz omits elegance from the three praiseworthy marks of speech (clarity, truth, and elegance):⁶⁴

since our discussion concerns philosophical discourse and the style that befits it, we shall omit elegance for the present, although we may admit that it can be of great service in securing attention, in moving minds, and in impressing things more deeply on the memory.

⁶⁰ Leibniz (1969), 123 for this and the following quotation.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 126 for this and the following two quotations.

⁶³ On this see Laerke (2009).

⁶⁴ Leibniz (1969), 121-122.

Not surprisingly, he considers Nizolio's principles of correct philosophizing, which included knowledge of classical languages and their literature as well as grammar and rhetoric, "principles of speech rather than of thought."⁶⁵ Thus, although he presents Nizolio as an excellent guide toward a "sober, proper, natural, and truly philosophical way of speaking," his omission of elegance from philosophical style suggests that the Ciceronian link between *verba* and *res*, style and content, elegance and clarity-truth, was no longer felt as intimate and intrinsic in the way in which humanists such as Nizolio had done.⁶⁶

Conclusion

One of the aims of this article has been to show that the humanists, while most of them were not philosophers in any modern sense of the word, were important sources for later Renaissance thinkers and early modern philosophers for the way in which they formulated their critique of scholastic language. All shared a conviction – which we certainly do not need to share – that this language, at least in its more baroque forms, was artificial, unnatural, uninformative, ungrammatical, and quasi-precise. The scholastics were accused of having introduced a terminology that was a far cry from the common language people spoke, wrote, and read. They had erected a building in which no one but they wanted to live, full of invented notions and entities. But criticizing this language – and with that, a whole way of doing philosophy – is one thing, formulating an alternative is something else, and the notion of the common language turned out to be not so straightforward as it seemed.

For generations of humanists from Petrarch to Vives (and beyond) classical Latin was the common language, providing the norm for anyone who wanted to speak and write Latin. Their conviction was that it also provided a *sine qua non* for clear thinking. But as we have seen, common also meant what "everybody" would "normally" say in such and such a situation or how we "naturally" would argue or reason. Hence humanists emphasized that our grammars and handbooks of logic should be based on practice and usage rather than on theoretical rules of one's own making. What we see in the writings of these humanists is a smooth equation of these two senses of "common." Valla, for instance, frequently mentions "the speech that is common as well as learned" in one breath (*popularis sermo atque eruditorum*), speaking also of "speech that is natural, speech commonly used by educated people" (*ad naturalem et a doctis tritum sermonem*) or referring to "those who speak naturally

⁶⁵ Leibniz in Nizolio (1956), vol. 1, 30.

⁶⁶ These last sentences are taken from my (2012), 62.

(*naturaliter*), like orators.”⁶⁷ In Vives we saw a similar merging of the category of the *auctoritates* with that of the common people. For two reasons this perhaps surprising interpretation of classical Latin as the common language seemed to these humanists a very natural one. First, they could believe that the day was near when an updated version of classical Latin would indeed be the language spoken and written again by a wide community of people. Second, since both classical Latin and our so-called common way of speaking were contrasted to the unnatural, “distorted” language of the scholastics, it was a short step for them to blur the distinction between the first two, particularly when such an elision aided in their fight against that scholastic language.

And yet they also realized that even this common language could be misleading in not always presenting the facts adequately (the vessel is empty, while it is, strictly speaking, not empty as it contains air). Cicero had already made this point, and, as we saw, Valla and Vives repeated the distinction between on the one hand an “exact” or “strict”, also called “philosophical” description, and on the other hand an everyday or common sense one. They must have felt a bit uneasy about the distinction, for it seemed to leave the door ajar for the view that the common language was not always good enough for philosophical purposes, and that more exact uses of words had to be allowed for. Hence, we saw an attempt in Valla, Vives but also in Gassendi to deny the scholastic philosophers their self-proclaimed “rigor.” For the humanists “rigor,” if it meant anything at all, could refer only to the semantic precision of classical Latin. This equation was simply a repetition of their position and did not answer the issue raised by Cicero, for the rigor of classical Latin was apparently not always rigorous enough, as Cicero himself had in fact admitted.

Sixteenth-century Ciceronians bit the bullet and declared Cicero’s Latin to be the only norm, a position deftly demolished by Erasmus, who pleaded – in the line of Valla and Poliziano – for a more flexible Latin, of course based (though not exclusively) on classical authors.⁶⁸ But the rise of the vernaculars made the equation of common language with classical Latin (of whatever stamp) increasingly difficult to defend. Common language could also mean the vernacular, though in practice Latin remained the lingua franca. But neither Latin nor the vernacular were always precise or reliable, as e.g. Vives, Sanches, and Leibniz pointed out. Hence, as before, “common” was an easy label used as weapon against what one

⁶⁷ Valla (2012), vol. 1, 106; vol. 2, 208 and 228. For more references see Nauta (2009), 371 n. 36 where I explain that in Valla “natural” does not always refer to the “vernacular” as opposed to Latin, but to our common way of speaking and writing, irrespective of the particular language we use.

⁶⁸ There are several articles pertinent to this theme in Ford et al. (2014).

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thought was definitively *not* common, namely the language of the scholastics, but in a world that linguistically speaking became increasingly more pluralistic it became even more difficult to give positive substance to the notion. Sanches, for instance, no longer felt the intimate bond between classical Latin and the so-called common language as earlier humanists had done. Refusing Ciceronian Latin as much as scholastic terminology, he defended a language that he felt reflected the *res* (things) in a direct way, and Gassendi claimed the same for his manner of expression. But, as just noticed, the problem was that this language (Latin in their case) could not be equated with that of the common people, which was often imprecise for science and philosophy. From Valla to Leibniz we read that linguistic usage and convention should be followed – Leibniz said it in German (*der Gebrauch ist der Meister*) – but *whose* usage was thus not so easy to define.

The attack on what was considered the artificial and unnatural language of the scholastics continued in the seventeenth century: the alternative that was presented was the “common” language, either Latin as the lingua franca of the expanding Republic of Letters or the vernacular to address an even wider public. Philosophical and scientific language ought to be clear, plain and non-metaphorical – in the words of Leibniz “sober, proper, natural,” or in the words of Gassendi “an unaffected prose style which flows spontaneously,” an ideal that was endorsed later by the Royal Society.⁶⁹ This is not to say that philosophy was now always conducted in such a clear, “natural,” and common language. But the point is that the long road of what we may call the democratization of philosophical language, so dear to early-modern philosophers, had its roots – ironically perhaps – in the humanist return to classical Latin as the common language. It was the humanist idiom of “linguistic usage,” “convention,” “custom,” “common” and “natural” language, and “everyday speech” that was repeated and put to new use by early-modern philosophers in their critique of scholastic language. Here then is a clear line of continuity between the Renaissance and early-modern philosophy.

⁶⁹ The ideal of stylistic plainness also had strongly political and religious connotations; on these debates on rhetoric in seventeenth-century England, see Vickers (1985). Royalists and Conformists used it as a weapon to marginalize nonconformist sects. Such wider dimensions of the debates on language between humanists and scholastics are explored by Moss (2003) and in D’Amico (1983), dimensions which I have hardly touched on in this article.

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