Eugenia Sisto, PhD candidate

Digital workshop "Teaching Neo-Latin: texts, materials, didactic challenges"

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A new understanding of Latin: the case of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*

Today, I will present a proposal for a teaching session focused on Latin materials, designed for undergraduate students who already have a knowledge of Latin. I will dedicate the session to Dante Alighieri's *De vulgari eloquentia*, a treatise that offers an innovative perspective on fourteenth-century Latin and Neo-Latin literature. However, how can we study Dante's use of Latin? The *De vulgari eloquentia* offers a fascinating case study for a class, as it can be analysed either as a metalinguistic work or as a practical example of Latin usage in medieval times, before the dawn of Humanism. This session will guide students through both a textual and contextual analysis of the treatise, highlighting Dante's role in shaping the interplay between Latin and vernacular languages of Italy. I plan to structure this two-hour session into three main parts.

Part 1. Setting the Scene, which should last 20 minutes:

- I begin with a brief lecture on Dante's life and his pivotal influence on the use of medieval Latin in the fourteenth century;

- I provide an overview of the linguistic landscape of Italy at the time;

- I explore how Dante's work – *De vulgari eloquentia* – fits into this dynamic, highlighting the significance of Latin as a literary tool, while the vernacular gained ground.

Part 2. Textual Analysis and Problem Solving, which should last 30 minutes:

- For the hands-on part, I provide students with a passage from the *De vulgari eloquentia* in Latin. I give some time to work in pairs on a suitable translation for this text;

- I encourage the class to reflect on the nuances of the language and on Dante's careful word choices by offering guiding questions.

Part 3. Literary Contextualisation and Discussion, around 50 minute long:

- We discuss and find together the most appropriate translation of the text;

- We then shift our focus to the context. Here, we discuss the challenges and interpretive decisions involved in translating Dante;

- Lastly, we examine how this passage illustrates key themes in *De vulgari eloquentia* and how it exemplifies Dante's larger project of refining the vernacular language while using Latin.

This interactive format will allow the class to engage deeply with the text, applying both linguistic and cultural lenses. By the end of the session, students will have a more nuanced understanding of Dante's contribution to Latin literature in medieval times and his role in the standardisation of the vernacular through his use of Latin.

Prior to the teaching session, I provide students with a list of preliminary readings to familiarise themselves with the necessary tools for studying Dante. I recommend that students read a full English translation of *De vulgari eloquentia* and I circulate the Latin text for translation in advance. Regarding scholarly studies on *De vulgari eloquentia*, I ask the class to read:

– Shapiro, Marianne, *De Vulgari Eloquentia. Dante's Book of Exile* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990). Focus on the 'Introduction: Dante's Book of Exile' and 'Conclusion: Problems and Perspectives' (**required**, available at the Warburg Institute, SAS).

About the use of Latin and the socio-linguistic context of fourteenth-century Italy, I suggest:

– Hall, Robert A. Jr., 'The Significance of the Italian "Questione della Lingua"', *Studies in Philology,* 39.1 (1942), 1-10 (**required**, available on JSTOR);
– Janson, Tore, *A Natural History of Latin* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Focus on 'Part II Latin and Europe' (**required**, available at the Institute of Classical Studies, SAS);
– Clackson, James and Geoffrey Horrocks, *The Blackwell History of the Latin Language* (Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). Focus on 'Chapter VIII: Latin in Late Antiquity and Beyond' (**optional**, available at the Institute of Classical Studies, SAS).

Part 1: Setting the Scene – Neo-Latin Language and Literature in Fourteenth-Century Italy

I provide a brief introduction to Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and contextualise his importance for Latin and vernacular literature. He was born in 1265 in Florence. He studied grammar and philosophy, and moved to Bologna to study rhetoric around 1287. From 1295 to 1302, he engaged in political and civic duties in Florence, but he was ultimately exiled for political reasons. We all know Dante as the author of the *Divine Comedy*, but not everyone may be aware that he also wrote important works on the relationship between Latin and the vernacular. While he was on exile, he produced two treatises: a philosophical encyclopaedia entitled the *Convivio* and a treatise about language and style, *De vulgari eloquentia*. Dante died in 1321 in Ravenna. He is nowadays well-known for his contribution to the debate around the use of Latin and the vernacular in fourteenth-century Italy. However, I want to remind the students that Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* was forgotten after its initial composition and was only rediscovered by the scholar Gian Giorgio

Trissino in 1529. It was only in the sixteenth century that this treatise gained significant attention and became a central topic in the debates about language.

By providing this brief biography about Dante, I am able to set the stage for analysing Latin literature and its reception during and after Dante's time. This context raises a key question: how should Dante's production be situated within the framework of the Latin literary tradition? Dante is such an interesting case because he wrote at the end of the medieval scholastic tradition of Latin – which would later be perceived as unrefined and even 'vulgar' – just before the revival of classical Latin by humanists like Petrarch. According to *The Oxford Handbook of Neo-Latin*: 'By "Neo-Latin," we mean the Latin language and literature from around the time of the early Italian humanist Petrarch (1304–1374) up until the present day'. Neo-Latin scholars of the humanist period aimed to emulate classical literary models. Although Dante predates Humanism, he moves beyond the Latin scholastic tradition. His works embody a profound synthesis of classical culture, Christian thought, medieval philosophy and science, along with an interest in the vernacular. In his *De vulgari eloquentia* (II, 6, 7-8), Dante identifies key Latin authors – Virgil, Ovid, Statius, and Lucan for poetry, while Livy, Pliny, Frontinus, and Paulus Orosius for prose – as models for establishing the rules of the vernacular language. Dante's position at the dawn of Humanism may pose an interpretative challenge. Dante draws on classical models not to advocate for Latin, as later humanists would, but to elevate the vernacular as a literary language. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of studying his use of Latin.

I now introduce Dante's concepts of Latin and the vernacular by looking at the main focus of this lecture, Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*. Between 1304 and 1307, he wrote the *De vulgari eloquentia*. Dante wrote his treatise in Latin but dealt with the topic of vernacular eloquence. He aimed to divide his work into four books but left it unfinished. Dante's treatise breaks off at the fourteenth chapter of the second book:

- Book 1 focuses on specific linguistic phenomena;
- Book 2 talks about poetry.

Why did Dante write a treatise about vernacular eloquence in Latin? Dante says that he aimed to enlighten all those who 'wander about like blind persons through the public squares,' offering them the fruits of his own learning but also adding the wisdom of others to produce 'the sweetest hydromel' (*DVE* I, 1, 1). On the one hand, Dante expressed his desire to enlighten the greatest possible number of people, without distinction of class and education. The vernacular would have been suitable to this purpose. On the other hand, it is ironic that Dante wrote his work on vernacular eloquence in Latin, as the majority of readers didn't know Latin anymore. This suggests that Dante employed Latin because he wanted to have his credentials accepted in learned circles. In fact, Dante aimed to bestow upon his treatise the same status as that of Latin grammars, maintaining a qualitative distinction among potential readers. Dante's choice to use Latin reflects the socio-linguistic situation of the Italian peninsula in the fourteenth century.

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I here introduce the students to the Italian socio-linguistic landscape of the fourteenth century. First, I provide an overview of that context through the lens of modern scholars. Second, I talk about Dante's perspective on the origins of Latin and the vernacular. Modern scholars have shown that the Italian peninsula was fragmented into a patchwork of small political realities – municipalities, Communes, and maritime republics. I present a map of the Italian peninsula to the students and explain that this fragmentation was due to historical and political reasons. Barbaric invasions and foreign governments led to this geographical division, which resulted in a linguistic division too. The presence of numerous small political entities contributed to the consolidation of vernacular languages. Vernaculars were autonomous linguistic systems that evolved from the regional varieties of Latin spoken across the Italian peninsula. Unlike Latin, however, the vernaculars had neither a defined grammar nor a literary tradition.

Focusing now on Dante's theories of language fragmentation, I sum up what he argued in his *De vulgari eloquentia*. According to Dante, God gave Adam a language that all men spoke until the construction of the Tower of Babel. The Babel Tower became a symbol of human ambition to overcome God. Due to their arrogance, God punished humanity with the inability to communicate with one another. Therefore, men created an artificial tool – Latin – to communicate between peoples who were talking different languages. However, Dante never really explains how and when precisely Latin was shaped. A further event disrupted communication between men: the fall of the Roman Empire. Due to the split of the Roman territories, Latin fragmented into regional vernaculars. In Italy alone, this led to the emergence of fourteen distinct vernaculars. In contrast to contemporary understandings of the origins of Latin and the vernacular, Dante offers an allegoric interpretation. He references a biblical episode, the Tower of Babel, to symbolise the original confusion of languages. By talking about the origins of Latin and the vernaculars, Dante contextualises the scenario in which he lives.

I emphasise the key role of the *De vulgari eloquentia* for the history of Neo-Latin literature. In this treatise, Dante uses the medieval concept of *gramatica* to identify Latin. Dante argues that men created Latin as an artificial language. Dante perceived Latin as the standard language, equipped with a defined grammar and consolidated literature, hence the label of *gramatica*. Latin was the language of the educated elite in Western and Central Europe, employed in the fields of law and philosophy, Church and State. On the other hand, Dante defines the vernacular as a 'natural language' spoken by the human kind. By 'vernacular', Dante means the language employed by people for everyday matters, something which is not taught but learnt spontaneously. However, the vernacular lacked a set of grammatical rules, acquired only after the fifteenth century. Given these premises, it is understandable that the cultural superiority of Latin culture encouraged Dante to write his treatise on vernacular eloquence in Latin. Dante's contribution to the use and reception of Latin in the fourteenth century is pivotal. What makes Dante's understanding of Latin unique? Dante's perspective is one-of-a-kind because he examines the medieval definition of Latin in the context of its dynamic relationship with the vernacular.

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Part 2: Textual Analysis and Problem Solving – Translating Dante's Latin

After setting the scene on Dante and Latin literature in fourteenth-century Italy through a frontal approach, I dedicate the second part of the session to an interactive textual analysis, accompanied by a problem-solving task. The text I propose is the exordium of the *De vulgari eloquentia*. I introduce the passage to the students by briefly commenting on the content. Here, Dante highlights the uniqueness of his work, as no one before him had conducted an analysis of the vernacular language. He outlines his objectives and articulates his theory on the relationship between Latin and the vernacular. I ask the students to work in pairs and agree on a suitable translation of the text provided in the preliminary materials. The choice of tools for translation could be a challenge. Students may be familiar with the most commonly used classical dictionaries, but these are not ideal here. I encourage the class to explore lexicons and vocabularies specifically for medieval Latin, such as the *Lexicon latinitatis medii aevi* (Blaise) and the *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* (Du Change). This way, I help them recognise the medieval character of Dante's Latin, which requires different analytical tools. To guide the students through the translation, I underline the passages of the text that I want them to focus on in case they run out of time. To keep things quick and simple, I will now read Botterill's translation of these underlined parts exclusively. However, I do not consider this translation a definitive model. The question of which translation is most suitable is the very topic I will be discussing with the students.

> [1] *Cum neminem ante nos de vulgaris eloquentie doctrina quicquam inveniamus tractasse, atque talem scilicet eloquentiam penitus omnibus necessariam videamus, cum ad eam non tantum viri, sed etiam mulieres et parvuli nitantur, in quantum natura permittit: volentes discretionem aliqualiter lucidare illorum qui tanquam ceci ambulant per plateas, plerunque anteriora posteriora putantes: Verbo aspirante de celis, locutioni vulgarium gentium prodesse tentabimus; non solum aquam nostri ingenii ad tantum poculum aurientes, sed accipiendo vel compilando ab aliis potiora miscentes, ut exinde potionare possimus dulcissimum ydromellum.*
> [2] *Sed quia unamquanque doctrinam oportet, non probare, sed suum aperire subiectum, ut sciatur quid sit super quod illa versatur, dicimus celeriter attendentes quod vulgarem locutionem appellamus eam quam infantes adsuefiunt ab adsistentibus, cum primitus distinguere voces incipiunt; vel quod brevius dici potest, vulgarem locutionem asserimus, quam sine omni regula, nutricem imitantes, accipimus.* [3] *Est et inde alia locutio secundaria nobis, quam Romani gramaticam vocaverunt.* *Hanc quidem secundariam Greci habent et alii, sed non omnes. Ad habitum vero huius pauci perveniunt, quia non nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem regulamur et doctrinamur in illa.* [4] *Harum quoque duarum nobilior est vulgaris: tum quia prima fuit humano generi usitata; tum quia totus orbis ipsa perfruitur, licet in diversas prolationes et vocabula sit divisa; tum quia naturalis est nobis, cum illa potius artificialis existat.* *Et de hac nobiliori nostra est intentio pertractare.*

> (*DVE* I, 1, 1-4)

> '[1] Since I find that no one, before myself, has dealt in any way with the z theory of eloquence in the vernacular, and since we can plainly see that such eloquence is necessary to everyone - for not only men, but also women and children strive to acquire it, as far as nature allows - I shall try inspired by the Word that comes from above, to say something useful about the language of people who speak the vulgar tongue, hoping thereby to enlighten somewhat the understanding of those who walk the streets like the blind, ever thinking that what lies ahead is behind them. Yet, in so doing, I shall not bring to so large a cup only the water of my own thinking, but shall add to it more potent ingredients, taken or extracted from elsewhere, so that from these I may concoct the sweetest possible mead. [2] But since it is required of any theoretical treatment that it not leave its basis implicit, but declare it openly, so that it may be clear with what its argument is concerned, I say, hastening to deal with the question, that I call 'vernacular language' that which infants acquire from those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds; or, to put it more succinctly, I declare that vernacular language is that which we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses. [3] There also exists another kind of language, at one remove from us, which the Romans called *grammatica*. The Greeks and some - but not all - other peoples also have this secondary kind of language. Few, however, achieve complete fluency in it, since knowledge of its rules and theory can only be developed through dedication to a lengthy course of study. [4] Of these two kinds of language, the more noble is the vernacular: first, because it was the language originally used by the human race; second, because the whole world employs it, though with different pronunciations and using different words; and third, because it is natural to us, while the other is, in contrast, artificial. And this more noble kind of language is what I intend to discuss.'

(Botterill 1996)

I also provide key questions for them to consider. This is the problem-solving part of the session. I encourage the class to reflect on the nuances of Dante's Latin and the objectives he aims to convey, by asking them:

1. What innovative claim does Dante make in his treatise?
2. What audience does Dante address?
3. In what ways do *vulgaris locutio* and *locutio secundaria* differ?
4. Who are the users of these two *locutiones*?
5. What subject does Dante promise to explore further?

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Part 3: Literary Contextualisation and Discussion – Finding the Right Translation

After the textual analysis, the third part of the session focuses on discussing the students' translation proposals. This is the longest part as it involves a group's debate around the text, context, interpretation, and challenges. I ask each student to share one sentence of the translation with the class. By doing so, students can reflect on the most suitable translation as a cohesive group, comparing their interpretations and challenges. I want the class to think about Dante's choice of specific terms, which has sparked heated debates among contemporary scholars. Therefore, I refer to:

– *Locutio, -onis*: does Dante think of a 'means of human expression', as Tavoni (1987) argues, or 'language', as Marigo (1938) and Mengaldo (1979) claim?

– *Aperire*: how would you translate this verb? Would you use Marigo and Mengaldo's translation*,* 'to declare', or Tavoni's interpretation, 'to unveil'? Do you have any other proposals?

– *Subiectum, -i*: does Dante mean 'topic', as Tavoni interprets, or 'fundamental premise of the doctrine', as Marigo and Mengaldo suggest?

– *Vulgaris locutio* vs. *locutio secundaria/gramatica*: how would you translate these concepts? What characteristics does Dante emphasise about them?

By focusing on lexicon, I help students reflect on Dante's language theories and familiarise themselves with the scholarly debate surrounding Dante's reception. Terms like *vulgaris eloquentia, doctrina, locutio,* and *grammatica* are characteristic of medieval treatises on linguistics and rhetoric, taking on new meanings with Dante's definitions. At this point of the session, I invite the class to trace and discuss Dante's contributions to the theoretical discourse on language in Renaissance Italy, particularly following Trissino's rediscovery of the *De vulgari eloquentia* in the sixteenth century. Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* holds a pivotal place in European literature, as it was the first work to introduce the concept of the historical development of language through the comparative method. Studying this text in a Humanities class is crucial, as it lays the groundwork for the following humanistic debate around the relationship between Latin and the vernacular. By the end of this section, I would like my students to have acquired additional analytical tools to investigate a Latin text in the context of fourteenth-century Italy.