

Language Origin and the Nature of Language:
a Linguistic Interpretation of Dante's De Vulgari Eloquentia

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ABSTRACT

This interpretation of the De Vulgari Eloquentia is limited to Chapters I-VIII of Book One, which deal with language origin and the nature of language. I discuss four topics: (1) the species-specificity of language, (2) the possibility that thought may occur without language, (3) the form of language, and (4) the origin of language.

In section (1), I show that Dante bases the species-specificity theme on the claim that man has a unique nature. I describe Dante's comparison of Man to the other beings in creation, the angels and the beasts. Dante concludes that Man shares reason with the angels, and emotions with the beasts, and differs from both in possessing individual differences. The implications that I draw for language concern semantic creativity, inter-translatability, and the basic relation between meaning and sound.

A negative answer to (2), i.e., a conclusion that thought must take place by means of language, would imply that all thoughts can be expressed by language. Although I discuss the problem, I can draw no conclusions from the De Vulgari.

In section (3), I discuss the three entities considered under form: names, semantic order, and syntactic order. I interpret Dante as saying that sociological factors are extra-linguistic, and that dialect differences are a result of social differences.

Two interpretations emerge in my discussion of the origin of language.

First, I give evidence that Dante presents the original language as equal in complexity to modern languages. Second, he implies that all languages have a common origin.

Dante's De Vulgari Eloquentia treats of many ideas about language that are still problems for modern linguists. Since several of these concepts are couched in mythological terms, careful interpretation is required to make them explicit. In this paper I limit my discussion to Chapters I-VIII of Book One, which examine language origin and the general nature of language. While many of the ideas brought out in these chapters were also advanced by the contemporaries and predecessors of Dante, it is beyond the scope of this paper to trace these relationships.

I. The species-specificity of language.

Chapters II and III advance the thesis that language is a property of Man alone. Dante demonstrates that the species-specificity of language is rendered necessary by the unique nature of Man.

...nam eorum que sunt omnium soli homini datum est
loqui, cum solum sibi necessarium fuerit.

-Chapt. II, 1

To do this, he compares Man to the two other types of beings in the universe, the angels and the beasts.

Taking first the angels, we see that Man, like the angels, is moved by reason ("...homo, non nature instinctu, sed ratione moveatur," - III, 1). But the angels, unlike Man, have an extremely potent intellect ("...angeli ad pandendas gloriosas eorum conceptiones habeant promptissimam atque ineffabilem sufficientiam intellectus" - II, 3) with which they can discern each other's ideas without the use of other media. Dante uses the metaphor of a shining mirror, in which all the angels are represented at their most

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beautiful and which they observe most eagerly. They learn each other's thoughts by means of this mirror.

...alter alteri totaliter innotescit per se, vel saltim per illud fulgentissimum speculum, in quo cuncti representantur pulcherrimi atque avidissimi speculantur, nullo signo locutionis indiguise videntur.

-II, 3

This metaphor may be interpreted in logical terms, as follows: If all angels can divine each other's ideas by pure logic (reason), then they must be using the same logical model. Given the same premises, they will deduce the same conclusion. So all that is needed for one angel to deduce the ideas of another is a given set of premises and a deductive procedure. The premises can be divined by all angels equally well.

Man differs from the angels in two ways. First, although he is "moved by" reason, this reason is not pure but is affected by non-spiritual factors such as emotions ("grossness and opacity of the mortal body" "...cum grossitie atque opacitate mortalis corporis humanus spiritus sit obtentus." -III, 1). Second, thoughts in human beings are not constructed all on the same model, but are different for each person: "reason itself is diversified in individuals, either with respect to discretion, or with respect to judgement, or with respect to choice."

...et ipsa ratio vel circa discretionem vel circa iudicium vel circa electionem diversificetur in singulis..."

-III, 1

Consequently, people cannot read each other's minds. Even if two persons should come to the same conclusion independently, they would not know they had done so without speaking or writing to each other, because of the high probability of individual differences.

The devils (demonos) are the angels who fell from spirithood ("qui

corruerunt spiritibus" -II, 4). In order to "communicate" to one another and to manifest their perfidy to each other ("ad manifestandam inter se perfidiam suam"), they merely use the knowledge they had of one another before their fall, especially their knowledge of existence and rank (II, 4). They cannot communicate new knowledge, since they have lost the divine sanction needed for creating new ideas. In contrast, both angels and Man can create ideas, since they have divine approval. Thus, their form of communication must be able to embody new thoughts.

I would infer from this presentation that, for Dante, creativity in language lies in the creativity of human reason. New meanings make language creative. There is no suggestion of structural creativity; however, changes in structure might be considered part of change in general. Dante says that Man is prone to change, one cause being his instability:

...homo sit instabilissimum atque variabilissimum
animal, nec durabilis nec continua esse potest...

-IX, 6

In fact, Dante compares language change to the change in a young man growing up (IX, 7-8). Another cause of change might be the creativity of reason: compare the non-creative devils, who haven't changed since their Fall.

We find next Man compared to the beasts. Beasts do not have reason but are moved "by natural instincts alone" ("solo nature instinctu ducantur" II, 5). Therefore, human language is not necessary to beasts, since the function of language is to communicate ideas.

Si etenim perspicaciter consideramus quid cum
loquimur intendamus, patet quod nichil aliud quam
nostre mentis enucleare aliis conceptum.

-II, 3

"If indeed we consider clearly what we intend when
we speak, it is clearly nothing other than to
explain to others an idea of our mind."

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Beasts all share the same actions and passions. They can understand the nature of other beasts by attributing to them their own properties.

...nam omnibus eiusdem speciei sunt iidem actus
et passiones, et sic possunt per proprios alienos
cognoscere;

-II, 5

Thus beasts are like angels, to the extent that individual differences are minimized. I think Dante is implying that Man is the only being that has truly individually different properties. This singular attribute is reflected in language, which can express the unique thoughts and feelings created by an individual. Since the function of language is to convey thoughts, the means used to convey emotions and instinctual drives (such as cries and courtship, dances) are not part of language.

Among beasts, communication is possible only within the same species (II, 5). Dante says that communication across species would be harmful. We might consider inter-species mating as an example of a bad effect. Mankind is set in implicit contrast, since all people can communicate with each other. It is of course true that mankind has many different languages ("permultis ac diversis ydiomatibus" -VI, 1). In fact, a speaker of one language cannot understand a speaker of a different language ("multi multis non aliter intelligantur verbis quam sine verbis" -VI, 1). To handle this apparent contradiction, Dante postulates an ideal state of Man in which there is only one language, which is the original state of man in Eden (Chpts. IV-VI). If this idealization is interpreted as referring to a universal semantic base, then it is being claimed that all people can communicate on the level of meaning. Such an interpretation suggests that Dante is supporting the hypothesis of total inter-translatability of languages. He would probably agree that in learning other languages, people have access to a common semantic base.

A final problem for the uniqueness claim is posed by animals who can imitate language, such as magpies. Dante, following St. Thomas (Marigo, p. 16, note 38), distinguishes between sound (sonus) and speech (locutio). Of these animals, he says: "It is clear that they strive to imitate us in so far as we sound, but not in so far as we speak."

...videlicet quod nituntur imitari nos in quantum sonamus, sed non in quantum loquimur.

-II, 7

He says of the magpie: "Whence, if, someone clearly saying 'pica,' it were also to echo 'pica,' this would be nothing but a representation or imitation of the sound of that one who spoke before" (-II, 7). What these animals lack is the second component of the sign, reason. They do not comprehend the meaning of the sign, and consequently they cannot create new meanings. This accounts for their inability to invent new signs. They are restricted to imitation, since creativity in language arises from creativity in reason, which they do not have.¹

Dante's concept of the sign (signum) summarizes his concept of the nature of human language. The sign is first of all rational: "rationale esse oportuit"; its function is to take from reason and carry to reason ("de ratione accipere habeat et in rationem portare" -III, 2), that is, to convey meaning. The sign thus encompasses both the hearer and the speaker. It must have some element in common for both speaker and hearer, which we can assume to be ideas. This concept of linguistic elements common to speaker and hearer is, of course, carried on in modern generative-transformational grammar, which holds that language is an abstract system that operates in both production and perception. But modern linguistics holds that the mechanisms of language itself, as well as meaning, are part of this common knowledge.

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Second, the sign is sensible, since as we have seen, a person cannot read someone else's mind but must communicate through a sensible medium ("de una ratione in aliam nichil deferri possit nisi per medium sensuale" III, 2). One sensible medium is sound: "nam sensuale quid est, in quantum sonus est" (-III, 3). It is conceivable that other sensible media that convey meaning, such as sign language, would be considered a "medium sensuale."

Dante refers briefly to the concept of the arbitrariness of the sign, a concept developed by St. Thomas and Aristotle (Marigo, p. 19, note 17). A sign is a unit which denotes or means something. The smallest such unit probably corresponds to the morpheme of modern linguistics. For a semiotic interpretation, however, see Sebeok (1974, p. 240).

The sign is thus a relation of meaning to sound. We find the following summary of its nature:

Hoc equidem signum est ipsum subiectum nobile de quo loquimur: nam sensuale quid est, in quantum sonus est; rationale vero, in quantum aliquid significare videtur ad placitum.

-III, 3

The sign is rational, sensible, and expresses ideas which are individual (ad placitum). I interpret it in addition as creative, insofar as it embodies new ideas.

II. Can there be thought without language?

In Chapters IV and V, Dante is concerned with the first word, or the beginning of language. I shall look at these chapters in terms of their implications for the question of whether thought can occur without language. Since the angels have thoughts in the absence of speech, pure thought (thought unmixed with other elements) does exist in Creation. But does it exist in Man? The sign for Dante is itself partly thought. Since the sign is the embodiment of language, we can translate the question as asking

whether thought can occur in the absence of signs.

The first word, says Dante, was uttered before the fall of Man. This first word was El or 'God': since Man was made by God, and through God, and since God is omnipotent, Man could not have named anything else first. Now it is a fact, Dante argues, that every speech after the fall begins with heu 'alas'. But since El 'God' denotes joy, and there was true joy only before the fall, it follows that El must have been uttered before the fall (IV, 4).

Dante asks whether the first word was a question or an answer ("vel per modum interrogationis, vel per modum responsionis" -IV, 4). Assuming first that it was an answer, he says it must have been an answer to God ("si responsio fuit ad Deum" -IV, 5). This must be so, since God was the only other being in Eden. But God could not have posed the question in the form of speech, since it was Man who produced the first word. How then did He make a question? Dante resolves the problem by noting that God can "speak" in forms that are not human speech ("nec propter hoc Deus locutus est ipsa quam dicimus locutionem" -IV, 6). In this respect, God is like the angels, who have pure thought. (Indeed, since God is more perfect than the angels, he must have pure thought.)

Assume for the moment that God's question was in the form of pure thought. Now an answer is a response to a stimulus. And if Man was made by and through God, then God must be in Man. Therefore the first word is a response to a pure thought which is in Man, as well as in God. This suggests a distinction between thought and speech. If God is the energizing force of speech, then the force is thought, which precedes and is distinct from speech. Accordingly, Dante says that the first speaker spoke at once after having been inspired by the vivifying force.

...dicimus ipsum loquentem primum, mox postquam
afflatus est ab animante Virtute, incunctanter
fuisse locutum.

-V, 1

We can infer that thought may occur in the absence of speech.

Suppose on the other hand that the first word was a question. Dante does not consider this possibility. However, in discussing the first word as an answer, we found that the question was a thought. If this is the case, then the question or thought preceded the answer or word. But if the question or thought is also the word, then thought and word are not distinct. Thought occurs in the form of speech, or rather in the form of the sign, which is the basis of speech.

Dante appears to favor the first position, that thought can occur distinct from the sign. Thus he says that God discerns Man's thoughts without speech, even before Man discerns them:

...Deus omnia sine verbis archana nostra discernat
etiam ante quam nos... Deus sciret, immo presciret
(quod idem est quantum ad Deum) absque locutione
conceptum primi loquentis...

-V, 2

However, he appears to support the opposite position as well. Consider that the function of speech is communication, and that communication is the conveying of ideas from one person to another. But when the first person, Adam, spoke, there was no other person in Eden (this was before the creation of Eve). He didn't have to speak ("non oportebat illum loqui, cum solus adhuc homo existeret"). The explanation offered by Dante is simply that speech is a human faculty and that it is natural to exercise one's faculties. Thus, he says that we glorify God in the orderly exercise of our faculties (V, 2). Likewise, the basic nature of man is active rather than passive.

Nam in homine sentiri humanius credimus quam sentire,
dummodo sentiatur et sentiat tanquam homo.

-V, 1

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"For in man we believe it more human to be experienced than to experience, while he is experienced and experiences as a man."

However, a better explanation might lie in the claim that thought must take place by way of the sign. It is very plausible to suppose that a human being alone in the world would speak, even though there was no one to speak to, because by speaking he could form thoughts. This is the principle of the dramatic monologue, which Adam is performing here.

Although Dante's position on this question cannot be determined, an answer would have implications for the principle of effability (Katz 1972). According to this principle, every human thought can be expressed by natural language. Katz cites a passage from Frege which aptly summarizes the principle:

...a thought grasped by a human being for the first time can be put into a form of words which will be understood by someone to whom the thought is entirely new...

-Katz (1972), p. 19, quoting from Frege (1963), p. 1

Now if all thought must take place by means of the sign (or language), then it follows necessarily that all thought is expressible by language. If however all thought need not occur through the sign, then it is possible that some thoughts are not expressible in language.

III. The form of language.

In Chapter VI, Dante is concerned with the form of speech:

Redeunt igitur ad propositum, dicimus certam
formam locutionis a Deo cum anima prima concreatam
fuisse. Dico autem 'formam' et quantum ad rerum
vocabula et quantum ad vocabulorum constructionem
et quantum ad constructionis prolationem;

-VI, 4

Form (formam) has three components:

(1) the names of things (rerum vocabula), that is, substantives. These

names indicate the essential, unchanging part of a word's meaning (Marigo, p. 36, note 26). In the absence of contrary specification, res can be assumed to denote both concrete and abstract things.

(2) the putting together of words (vocabulorum constructionem). Constructio probably refers to the semantic order of words (Marigo, p. 35, note 26). It may be appropriate to extend the scope of vocabulorum to include verbs and other word types as well as nouns.²

(3) the extension of the connection (contractionis prolationem). Prolatio probably refers to the grammatical arrangement of words, in particular, grammatical agreement (in gender, number, case, etc.) (Marigo, p. 35, note 27). Marigo suggests that it may also refer to the phonetic actualization of speech. On the basis of authors contemporary with Dante, he conjectures that prolatio refers to accent. He conjectures a further reference to articulatory characteristics distinctive to different peoples.

Prolatio 'extension' might also refer to the connection of sentences into a discourse. This is however doubtful, both in view of the position taken by grammarians of the time, e.g. Priscian, who confines arrangement of words to the oratio or proposition (Marigo, p. 35, note 26), and in view of the scope of prolatio itself. Agreement and accent are best defined in terms of the clause.

If we integrate Dante's treatment of the sign and the interpretation of form given above, we find that speech (locutio) has three basic parts: content or meaning, form, and sound. Form has three components, words, clauses and grammatical particles. Since the function of speech is to carry ideas, we can assume that meaning is the basic part. Sound, the sensible medium, is the external manifestation of speech. Meaning is related to sound through the mediation of form.³ The sign symbolizes the whole

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meaning-sound relationship, that is, language.

Dante's discussion of speech does not include social, psychological and anthropological factors that affect language. Since he is presumably discussing the elements he considers basic to language, we can surmise that these other aspects, today called "extra-linguistic" factors, are not considered basic to speech. Support for this inference is found in Dante's description of the first language. The first language, which was created by God (-VI, 4), was the "language of grace," as opposed to the "language of confusion" which developed after the fall of man ([Hebrew, the first language, was] "non lingua confusionis, sed gratie" -VI, 6). Now the language of confusion arose because of the building of the tower of Babel. When God punished the builders, the original language was separated into many different languages, which were distinguished according to the kind of work the people were doing. The more excellent the work, the more barbaric the language (VII, 7-8). In other words, the original perfect language was destroyed when social differences arose among men. In Eden, the home of the original language, there were no social differences. If the original language represents the ideal of language, then language in its ideal state is not affected by social forces.

The claim implied by this account, that the first language was a unity with no dialect differences, might be interpreted in a Chomskyian sense as claiming that a multi-dialect language such as English can be described by a unitary 'ideal' system plus additional rules that differentiate the dialects. A more likely interpretation is that dialect differences are caused by social differences. Since in Eden all people were on the same social level, the first language had no dialect differences. Dante is not consistent here, since he claims that woman (Eve) is inferior to man (Adam) (IV, 3). But

this may be an effect of the need to conform to Catholic dogma.

IV. The origin of language.

I shall look next at Dante's views on the origin of language. Consider first the question of the complexity of the original language. Early studies in Indo-European assumed that proto-languages were simpler than present-day languages. This assumption formed the basis for the theory of parataxis, which claimed that Proto-Indo-European lacked embedded sentences. It has been recently shown by Lehmann (1974) that this apparent lack of subordinate sentences is due to the fact that Proto-Indo-European was an SOV language, sharing typical traits of SOV languages, such as the lack of relative clause markers.

The model of language that I have ascribed to Dante is certainly as complex as modern-day models. Since this model is supposed to characterize the first language, this must be as complex as modern languages.

As we have seen, Dante says that the first speech was created by God. Now God symbolizes perfection of reason, since He is more perfect than the angels, who themselves have almost perfect reason. Further, we have seen that God is in Man. Indeed, the first word was 'God'. So the language created by God in Man could not have been less perfect in form or meaning than modern languages.

Dante claims in addition that the first language was Hebrew, spoken by the Redeemer (Jesus), who revived a state of grace (VI, 5-6). Now it would be impossible for the first language to be inferior to any modern language, in view of the fact that Hebrew is a modern language.

A second issue is raised in the De Vulgari concerning the number of original sources for language. It is clear that Dante subscribes to the

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theory of monogenesis. In Chapter VI, he says the first language was Hebrew, and that other languages arose later, after the building of the tower of Babel. The basis of his claim is the then current belief that mankind originated from just one place, the East (probably Mesopotamia) ("...radix humane propaginis principalis in oris orientalibus sit plantata"). The later "confusion of tongues" may suggest that men were scattered throughout the world at the time the different languages developed (VIII, 1).⁴ The claim of monogenesis is strengthened by Dante's statement that the first language had just one form (VI, 6).⁵

V. Conclusion

Many of the ideas brought out in this interpretation of the De Vulgari Eloquentia remain problems for linguistics. One example is the place of para-linguistic phenomena in a linguistic model.

The aim of the De Vulgari Eloquentia, as stated in Chapter I, is to explain natural language. The goal is 'knowledge of the common speech' ("vulgaris eloquentie doctrina" -I, 1). This is the noblest speech, since it was the first speech used by mankind and since it is natural, not artificial (I, 4). Dante's purpose is to enlighten those "who like blind men walk through the streets, for the most part thinking that the things which are in front of them [i.e. unknown] are behind them [i.e. known]" ("illorum qui tanquam ceci ambulant per plateas, plerunque anteriora posteriora putantes" -I, 1). He defines his task as follows: "it behoves every science not to demonstrate, but to reveal the true character of its subjects."

...unamquamque doctrinam oportet non probare,
sed suum aperire subiectum...

-I, 2

In this interpretation of Chapters I-VIII, Dante has indeed followed his own principle of investigation. He has succeeded in bringing out some fundamental aspects of language.

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NOTES

1. This claim is currently being challenged by research into the language ability of chimpanzees. It has been found that chimpanzees can use sign language to form meaningful utterances, and that they can invent new words by compounding signs previously learned. For a summary of research accomplished and in progress, consult Linden (1974).
2. In classical treatments, vocabula 'substantives' is distinguished from verba 'verbs' (Andrews, p. 1642). If Dante is preserving this distinction, we must conclude that he fails to specify a category for verbs.
3. This traditional view of speech is carried on today in several schools of linguistics, notably that of generative semantics.
4. Coon (1962) has suggested on the basis of archaeological evidence that the human species originated as distinct races, in different and separated parts of the world. Presumably Dante would accept this as evidence for polygenesis.
5. Within this century, formal evidence for monogenesis has been advanced by Morris Swadesh (1971), who used traditional comparative techniques to establish common origins. More recent work of this sort is found in Foster (1976). Cf. Trombetti (1922-23).

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