PART I

Introduction

CHAPTER I

Introduction: 'Vulgar Latin' and social variation

I 'Vulgar Latin'

Readers will recognise this book as likely to discuss the entity that has traditionally been called 'Vulgar Latin' (henceforth not in quotation marks unless essential), a term that can be traced back to a phrase in antiquity itself, *sermo uulgaris* (on the terminology see R. Müller 2001: 155–65). Many have tried to give Vulgar Latin a precise meaning (for discussion of the problems and ideologies behind such terminology see the still pertinent remarks of L. R. Palmer 1954: 148–9, Löfstedt 1956: II.355–65 and Väänänen 1981a: 3–6, and more recently Hofmann and Ricottilli 2003: 467–70, Poccetti, Poli and Santini 2005: 22–8, and a good deal of Coseriu 2008, e.g. 147–67; for an old survey of definitions see de Groot 1923: 112–13), but it has continued to generate confusion. Lloyd (1979) identified thirteen meanings that have been assigned to the term (no doubt many others could be found: see Poccetti, Poli and Santini 2005: 25), and such multivalence has been seen as a reason for avoiding it altogether (see Wright 1982: 52–4). Even attempts to come up with a vague working definition while denying the phrase any technical character may run into trouble. Wright for example states in the foreword to his translation of Herman's book (1967) on Vulgar Latin (Herman 2000: ix) that for Herman the term was 'just a collective label, available for use to refer to all those features of the Latin language that are known to have existed, from textual attestations and incontrovertible reconstructions, but that were not recommended by the grammarians' (cf. Herman 1967: 16). A problem is raised here by the words 'not recommended by the grammarians', because, as we will see below, 7 (i) (see too XXXIII.5), some features of the language with which grammarians found fault, far from belonging to lower, disparaged, social dialects, were current (majority) *educated* usage.[1] Grammarians do, it is true, transmit some information

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[1] It is also a problem that ancient grammarians express no opinion one way or another of many of the phenomena that appear in handbooks of Vulgar Latin.

about lower-class usages not recommended for use by the educated classes,
but their reasons for deeming a usage incorrect varied (see XXXIII.5), and
they were far from being interested only in contrasting uneducated with
educated usage.

Amid the terminological confusion there have on the other hand been
many who have offered no definitions at all but have applied the label
'vulgar' willy nilly to usages that seem to be outside educated norms.[2]
Commentaries on texts, literary and non-literary, are full of claims about
supposed 'vulgarisms' found in these works.

The etymology of the adjective in 'Vulgar Latin' (< *uulgus* 'common
people'), along with the widespread currency of the phrase as a scholarly
term in modern European languages, has created a sense that a variety of
Latin used strictly by the masses (as distinct from the upper classes) must be
identifiable, or have been identifiable in the Roman period. A complicating
factor is that *uulgus* and its derivatives, and particularly the form *uulgo*,
when used in metalinguistic comments may refer to general (including
educated) usage rather than the usage of the uneducated masses,[3] but the
latter meaning, sometimes with a derogatory implication, is well attested
(see now the discussion of R. Müller 2001: 117–65, with illustration of
the various meanings). In Latin writers there is recognition of a Latin of
the common people. Note for example Gell. 1.22.2 *atque id dicitur non
in compitis tantum neque in plebe uolgaria, sed in foro, in comitio, apud
tribunalia* ('that is said not only at crossroads and among the vulgar plebs,
but in the forum and assembly and before the tribunal'). In this case the
usage alluded to was current among Roman orators or lawyers as well as
among the ordinary people conversing at street corners, but the implication
is clear that often there would have been a difference between the Latin of
orators and that of the *plebs uolgaria* (on Gellius' use of *uulgus* see further
R. Müller 2001: 152–5). Sometimes the addition of the adjective *imperitum*
to *uulgus* makes it obvious that only the uneducated were being referred
to when a disparaged term or form was cited, as at Col. 8.2.4 *nec minus
Chalcidicum et Medicum, quod ab imperito uulgo littera mutata Melicum
appellatur* (see R. Müller 2001: 150; on this and other such expressions in
late Latin see Herman 1991: 32). For *imperiti* applied to speakers below
the level of the elite see also III.6. For disparagement by grammarians
specifically of the usage of the Roman plebs see below, 7 (i).

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[2] Two of my own books (Adams 1976a, 1977a) are guilty of this charge.
[3] Note the phrase *uulgus grammaticorum* at Gell. 2.21.6, referring to the majority of grammarians
themselves: see Holford-Strevens (2003: 175 n. 15).

In recent decades the inadequacy of 'Vulgar Latin' has been increasingly felt with the advance of sociolinguistics as a discipline. Analyses of social variations across well-defined social or occupational groups in modern speech communities are bound to show up traditional concepts of Vulgar Latin, however the phrase might be defined, as hopelessly vague. In this book we will not get involved in a critique of the terminology, and definitions of Vulgar Latin advanced in the past will not be collected and discussed. Instead a different, more practical, approach will be adopted, which will be explained later in this chapter (8). We will aim to determine what the study of a set of specific linguistic topics based on a full range of evidence has to tell us about social variation within Latin and its relevance to change over time. More will be said about 'social variation' below, 2.

We have already been somewhat disparaging of the term Vulgar Latin, which will not be used much in the book. It will, however, be maintained below (5) that the term can be serviceable precisely because of the inadequacy of the information available about lower social classes and their sociolects.

A little more must be said about problems associated with the term. There are three widespread notions, often linked to the use of 'Vulgar Latin', that need to be questioned particularly here. A section is devoted to each.

2   Aspects of social variation in language

First, the term, which is usually capitalised and thereby given almost technical status, implies that the Latin of the masses was a language variety quite discrete from the Latin of the educated; as Vincent (1997a: 168 n. 6) puts it, there has been a 'traditional hypostatization of "Vulgar Latin" as an independent language different and temporally discrete from the classical language'. This is a view that is at variance with the findings of those who have studied social variation in modern languages.

Where variables, particularly phonological, exist they tend not to be divided up neatly across social classes such that, for example, one class uses variable X and another variable Y. Note Chambers (2002: 350):

> In every community that has been studied so far, sociolinguists have found that phonological variables tend to be distributed throughout the population, regardless of class, but graded so that the higher classes use particular variants infrequently and under more constrained circumstances, usually in casual settings with intimate participants. Grammatical variables are much more likely to be absolute markers of class membership.

Chambers goes on (350) to illustrate this contention from the glottal stop
as a variant of /t/ in post-tonic position in Scotland and Northern England.
In Glasgow the glottal stop is used in the speech of all social classes, but
is of variable frequency from class to class. The gap between working-class
and middle-class speech is described as enormous. Chambers concludes:

> Clearly, what differentiates WC speech from MC speech in Glasgow is not
> the presence or absence of the glottal stop variant but its frequency.

He continues (350):

> Membership of the Glasgow speech community entails using the glottal stop
> variant sometimes, regardless of social status, but there is clearly much more
> to it than that. It also entails a speaker's tacit knowledge of the frequency
> that is appropriate to one's social status, and this awareness serves both as a
> regulator of one's own usage and as an evaluator of the usage of others.

It is important to note also that social class does not operate in isolation
as a determinant of linguistic behaviour. Most notably, since Labov (2006:
Chapter 4) it has been clear that class interacts with stylistic variation.
Labov (2006: 59) makes a distinction between *careful speech* and *casual
speech*. A member of a high social group when using casual speech may
depart more often from prestige usages than he would when using careful
speech. Conversely speakers further down the social scale may aspire to
use more prestige forms when they are speaking carefully (or, it might be
added, writing). The result of such stylistic variations is that social divisions
in speech are rendered less sharp than any idealised socio-economic index
might lead one to expect. Stylistic variations themselves are not absolute, or,
as Labov (2006: 84) puts it, 'all-or-none signals'. They form a continuum.
Three other influences studied by Labov, ethnicity (see Labov 2006: 180–
95), sex (196–7) and age (209–13) (see particularly Labov 2010: 294–322
on the intersection of sex, age and social class), must be mentioned here,
though they will not be dealt with in this book (see now Clackson 2011c:
508–14 on the evidence for variation in Latin related to sex and age, with
bibliography).

   The above observations will turn out to be directly relevant to some
of the data presented particularly in Part 1 of this book. Even from the
limited evidence that is available it will become clear that to assume rigid
phonological variations correlated exclusively with social class would be
misguided. In the conclusion to Part 1 (xi) we will return to Chambers'
remarks and summarise the findings of the preceding chapters that relate
to them.

3   Vulgar Latin, Classical Latin and the source of the Romance languages

Second, Classical Latin, which tends to be used as a synonym of educated or standard Latin, is widely regarded as fossilised, a standard language, such that it continued unchanged for centuries once it had emerged in the late Republic (on standardisation see particularly Clackson and Horrocks 2007 Chapter vi, with the conclusion at 227; Adams 2007: 13–17, 2008; and the overview of 'Classical Latin' by Clackson 2011b). Since the Romance languages manifestly display a mass of differences from Classical Latin (e.g. they do not preserve the synthetic passive of the infectum), and since (on the above view) change did not occur in Classical Latin itself, therefore change must be located elsewhere, namely in the Latin of the masses, or Vulgar Latin. Thus the Romance languages are seen, at least by some, as the outcome of Vulgar Latin.[4] This view has recently been put unequivocally by Solodow (2010: 107):

> Classical Latin is not exactly the ancestor of the modern languages; the Latin written by Cicero and Caesar and taught at school was not the direct source of Spanish, Italian, and French. Instead, those languages derive from a different variety, which may be called 'Vulgar Latin'. 'Vulgar' is not a judgmental term here, but has its etymological sense, 'of the *vulgus*, the common people'.

An extreme view of the distinction between (Classical) Latin and Vulgar Latin has been called by Wright (1982: 1) the 'two-norm theory'. According to this Latin went on being spoken well into the medieval period by the educated, whereas the uneducated at the same time were speaking evolved vernaculars (see Wright 1982: 1–3 for a collection of such opinions).

Various questions are raised by such distinctions. Was the educated language really so fixed? A study of the syntax of, say, Tacitus compared with that of Cicero a century and a half earlier would suggest not (see e.g. xxiv.2.2.1). Must linguistic change necessarily be located well down the social scale at its inception? Is there evidence for change within educated varieties of the language that was eventually to have an outcome in the Romance languages? Should we perhaps be referring to change within Latin in general, instead of in a particular variety? In modern societies linguistic

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[4] There has been, it should be remarked, the occasional attempt to derive the Romance languages from Classical Latin: see Mańczak (1974: 231) (with the critique of Väänänen 1977). Others have preferred to stress the complexities of the relationship between the Romance languages and varieties of Latin (see the remarks of Poccetti, Polin and Santini 2005: 24).

change has been shown to spread from above as well as from below (see
e.g. Labov 2006: 213 on a stigmatised New York phonological feature that
'has met with an extreme form of social pressure from above, and has
receded rapidly under this social correction'), and it will be interesting
to see whether there are signs of Latin innovations starting well up the
social/educational scale. The urban plebs were not entirely cut off from
the cultural and linguistic influence of the educated classes (see Horsfall
2003: 54–8), and there is no reason in principle why prestige usages should
not have spread downwards (see e.g. the index to Labov 2010 at 544,
s.vv. 'change from above', 'change from below'; also below, XXXIII.1.3 for a
discussion of this question in relation to Latin).

4 Early Latin, Vulgar Latin and the Romance languages

Third, there has been a tradition of finding anticipations of the Romance
languages in early Latin, particularly Plautus (see Marx 1909, Löfstedt 1911:
14–15 along with the index 343 s.v. 'Alt- und Spätlatein', Tovar 1964: 131,
Campanile [1971] 2008: 1.337–8, Mancini 2000b: 108–9, Mańczak 2006).
The argument or assumption goes that Plautus' plays, in dialogue form
and containing characters of differing social levels, give us an early glimpse
of features of the spoken language, not least of lower social groups. These
features may then disappear from view for centuries because of the high-
style character of much Latin literature, to resurface eventually in the
Romance languages.

   One ought to be cautious in assessing the evidence for this scenario.
Apparent continuities between the two chronological extremes may turn
out to be merely superficial. In this book various Plautine and early usages
and their relevance or otherwise to later developments will be considered
(for a summary see XXXIII.4).

5 'Vulgar Latin' as a serviceable term: the evidence for social variation in Latin

While 'Vulgar Latin' is easy to criticise, there are reasons why the term has
been serviceable.

   We do not know much about the language use of specific groups of
speakers at lower points of the social scale (but see XXXIII.1.4). Linguists of
modern languages have made use of the research of sociologists in attempt-
ing to explain what they mean by social class (see e.g. Ash 2002 for an

overview). Labov (2006: 108), for example, was able to use a ten-point socio-economic index combining three objective characteristics (occupation, education and income) in studying the social stratification of English in New York City. It is not open to a student of ancient sociolinguistics to set up subtle social divisions and to investigate linguistic variation across these categories. Numerous social groups in the Roman world are familiar to historians, such as the Roman plebs, slaves and freedmen, soldiers, 'rustics', doctors and vets, innkeepers and *muliones*, and the types of humble city dwellers listed by Martial 1.41 (see Purcell 1994, Horsfall 2003, the survey of invisible social types by Knapp 2011, and the sociolinguistic survey by Clackson 2011c: 514–19 mentioning various groups), but with a few exceptions (most notably soldiers and freedmen, or at least those depicted by Petronius and represented in the archive of the Sulpicii; see further below, 7 (iii), xxxiii.1.4) we do not have much of the linguistic output of specific lower-class groups and are never in a position to examine the distribution of variables (such as, say, the presence or absence of initial *h*) across the different groups (but see below, 7 (iii) on aspects of the *Cena Trimalchionis*). Our investigation of social variation must be unsubtle. We know a lot about the linguistic practices and attitudes of the literary elite, from their own writings and metalinguistic comments and from the extensive theoretical discussions extant written by the types of grammarians who had instructed them. We also know something of the writing practices of more practical men, such as architects, doctors and vets, who were educated but had not received the same pedantic instruction in the use of language as that experienced by those who had passed through the hands both of grammarians and rhetors. The architect Vitruvius even expresses a sense of his own linguistic insecurity because of this lack (1.1.18). Finally, we know quite a lot about the writing of soldiers of different ranks and educational status, from (e.g.) the commanding officer at Vindolanda (Cerialis: see *Tab. Vindol.* 225–90 with Bowman and Thomas 1994: 199–200) to humble African recruits using Latin as a second language in the desert of Tripolitania (*O. Bu Njem*: see Adams 1994b on their Latin). But for the most part badly spelt texts from the Empire come from the hand of writers whose precise social background is obscure, and our investigation of social variation tends to become a very general one, of elite versus non-elite usage. Only very rarely indeed do we find even general remarks about social dialects that are in some way more specific than the usual contrast between what is said *uulgo* and what should be or is said by the educated. One such is at Mart. 12.21.3–6, where Martial praises the speech of the Spanish

woman Marcella (see Adams 2007: 189–90). Not only does she not have
a Spanish accent, but she speaks the Latin of the Palatine, not that of the
Subura or Capitoline.

It has thus been inevitable that the 'masses' (*uulgus*) should have been
treated as undifferentiated, and a vague Vulgar Latin brought into being.

Romance etymological studies have given a further impulse to the term.
Romance philology has demonstrated that numerous Latin words surviving
in Romance languages are either unattested in Latin itself, or hardly attested
(see below, xxx). If a word is known to have existed but never surfaces in
literature it may often (but not always) be a reasonable guess that it had
its life in the speech of social groups below the elite.[5] What social groups
we cannot say because there is no textual evidence whatsoever, and for that
reason the language of the *uulgus* in general becomes its domicile. The idea
is crude, but we often cannot do better. What must be avoided, however, is
the notion that this language of the *uulgus* was a separate language system
completely discrete from that of higher social groups (on this point see
above, 2).

For a definition of Vulgar Latin as the Latin of the *uulgus* in the loosest
sense we may quote Herman (2000: 7), though one must resist the impli-
cation hinted at that linguistic change takes place in the uneducated part
of the population and not in the part that had had a school education:

> 'Vulgar Latin' . . . is used to refer to the set of all those innovations and
> trends that turned up in the usage, particularly but not exclusively spoken,
> of the Latin-speaking population who were little or not at all influenced by
> school education and by literary models.

On this type of definition of the term see the discussion of Hofmann
and Ricottilli (2003: 467–8). In Lloyd's (1979) list of thirteen definitions
it is numbered 5 (115), and disparaged. Lloyd himself felt (121) that if a
vague term was sometimes needed, 'Latin' itself would do, possibly with
specification, such as the Latin spoken in Spain by the uncultivated classes.
It is obvious that the Romance languages came from Latin, but it is still
worth asking whether different changes might have had their starting point
at varying social levels of the language. If there is reason to think that a
particular change begins at a social level beneath that of the educated elite,

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[5] There are of course other reasons why a term may remain out of sight. It may by chance never
have been needed in the texts and inscriptions that have survived. How many Latin numerals, one
wonders, are constructs rather than represented in texts? Or again a technical term may be invisible
simply because treatises dealing with the subject to which it belongs are not extant. See further below,
xxxiii.2 on the interpretation of submerged Latin.