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Edited by

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Theories of language

Richard Waswo

The Renaissance – as the name of a cultural movement and a period – enjoys the still-lasting distinction of self-creation. Not since Athena sprang full-grown from the forehead of Zeus (or Sin from Lucifer's, in Milton's version) has an epoch so self-consciously defined itself, along with and against the preceding one, for all posterity. The humanists' cultural self-flattery was of course expanded and intensified in the later nineteenth century by Jakob Burckhardt, whose particular praises of the artistic, idealistic, and individualistic energies of the period continue to command allegiance and stimulate debate today.¹ Most periods are obliged to make do with what posterity makes of *them* – no contemporaneous residents ever labelled themselves 'antique', or 'medieval' – or get designated merely by the decimal tyranny of the calendar (the Mauve Decade; the twelfth century) or by the dynastic accident of a long reign (Victorian England; Carolingian France). Other periods may *try* to name themselves, as our own seeks to call itself 'postmodern', only to produce continual dispute over the contents of the label, and the additional irony that its inventor (Jean-François Lyotard) did not use it as an exclusive 'period' designation.

But no such disputation or irony ever seemed to afflict the earlier generation of Italian humanists (from Petrarch through Leonardo Bruni and Coluccio Salutati to Poggio Bracciolini and Lorenzo Valla) who decided that they were the midwives of the 'rebirth' of a classical culture uncontestedly superior to that of their own time and place. In their manifold efforts to make this culture live again, in literature, education, and politics, these writers disputed mainly with each other. And although such efforts generated their own forms of doubt and pathos, the confidence that they were worth making remained absolute. Almost no one quarrelled with the enterprise itself, which was to revivify the Golden Age of Republican and/or Imperial Rome. No one joked about this enterprise until it had succeeded so far as to produce its own excesses; and even then, when in 1528 Erasmus subjected the slavish reproduction of Ciceronian prose style to some mild ridicule, he aroused a small tempest of outrage.

¹ See William Kerrigan and Gordon Braden, *The idea of the Renaissance* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

The inventors of the 'Renaissance', along with their sixteenth-century heirs, took it and themselves with no small degree of humourless seriousness.

For they were embarked on a kind of crusade, to recover and repossess a part of (what they were newly defining as) the cultural and political past. The crusade was focused, from first to last, on language: the purification of classical Latin from barbarous, 'medieval' accretions; the establishment of complete, correct, and 'authentic' classical texts, including especially those in ancient Greek, a language unknown to the Western 'Middle Ages' (and to Petrarch); and the constant production of grammars, rhetorics, editions, commentaries, and translations of all kinds that were the pedagogical vehicles for these aims and the insurance of their continuation. The humanists were, famously, philologists, and their acute attention to linguistic forms and usages had ultimately revolutionary consequences in the conceptualizing of three related but distinct branches of Western thought: history, religion, and philosophy. The first two revolutions were achieved, and constitute part of our present modernity; the third remained merely proposed, a challenge that awaited our own age to become as controversial as it was then.

History as the radical discontinuity between the present and the past was what emerged from the humanist observation of the differences between classical and medieval Latin – hence the Occident's still standard periodization of itself into the ancient, the medieval, and the modern. From the focus on the changes in the vocabulary and grammar of Latin grew a wider awareness of changes in the very institutions of Western culture: its legal systems, its government, its Church. Philology thus produced modern historicism, a move towards long-term structural and causal explanations for the discrete events listed in the earlier chronicles of *res gestae* – 'drum and trumpet history', in the words of one of the best studies of this transformation.² The textual passions of the humanists, their desire to return *ad fontes* – initially the ancient Greek texts that all the Roman writers knew – also came to focus on the West's most sacred text, renewed the study of ancient Hebrew, and thus made possible the Protestant Reformation. As conceived by the great reformers, in precise analogy to the humanist recovery and purification of classical texts, their 'revolution' was to be the recovery of the prior and purer practices of the early Christians, purged of the corruptions thereto accreted over the centuries in the Roman Church. The reformers read these practices out of the original languages of the Bible, and made the dissemination, translation, and interpretation of that book into a matter of (eternal) life or death.

² Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of modern historical scholarship: language, law, and history in the French Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 9.

There is a paradox in these two successful revolutions, which will be repeated in the case of the third and aborted one, and which has particular importance for literary criticism. The Renaissance reconceptions of history and of religion were based on the observance of change, first in language, then in various institutional practices. But the aim of the resultant programmes – of Latin pedagogy, of Protestantism, and of literary neoclassicism – was precisely to arrest those observed changes. Change – ‘innovation’ was the always pejorative English term for it in the sixteenth century – was not generally seen as desirable, even and especially by those who were most concerned to effect it. Revolutions justified themselves, as they usually have since, by a discourse of purgation and return to an idealized prior state of things: the prose of Cicero (not Peter of Spain); the doctrines preached in the New Testament (not those in papal decrees); the composition of epics (not chivalric romances). What was observed could not be approved, except in reverse; the only good change was a change back to something presumably better *because* nearer to the ‘sources’. It took a whole century of argument (the seventeenth) to arrive at the notion that change was itself desirable, under the since tyrannical appellation of ‘progress’. The decisive step, still, was the distance discovered by the Renaissance between whatever ‘sources’ were postulated and us, hence the necessity of a ‘rebirth’.

And the decisive field of this discovery was the social practice that subtended all forms of culture: language itself, but above all, writing. What had begun in the nostalgic admiration felt by Petrarch and the earliest humanists for both the political and stylistic achievements of the Romans became, by the middle of the fifteenth century, the basis for a philosophical enquiry into language that would constitute the first fully conceptualized alternative to the way it had been regarded since Plato and Aristotle. This challenge was formulated first and most explicitly in the work of Lorenzo Valla. Not incidentally, Valla’s best-known achievement today remains his unmasking of the forgery known as the ‘Donation of Constantine’.³ The way in which he demonstrated the falsity of the document, which other contemporaries merely suspected, was a consummation of the historical revolution and a beginning of the philosophical one. Deeply acquainted with the Latin usages of late antiquity, Valla could show that both the diction and the grammar of the purportedly fourth-century document did not exist before the eighth or ninth. The recognition of lexical, grammatical, and morphological change created the discipline of historical philology; the recognition of semantic change produced a new and powerful sense of language itself as a historical phenomenon. The

³ Christopher B. Coleman (trans.), *The treatise of Lorenzo Valla on the Donation of Constantine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922).

written record had its own history, was produced in its own moment; its meanings were not immune from time. It was the distinction of Valla to pursue the implications of this recognition – that language is a social practice that has a history – through his revival of Quintilian's rhetoric and into an attempt to redefine the nature and procedures of philosophy itself.

This proposed (and unconsummated, until this century) revolution in philosophy has been described by its principal diagnostician as the 'deontologizing' of language.⁴ This is nothing less than the radical reformulation of the relationship that had been presumed, since Plato and Aristotle (via whom it was long established in scholastic thought), to supply language with meaning: the relation between *res* and *verba*, things and words. The traditional understanding of this relation was that words acquired meaning by standing for things, and it had long been formalized as the referential theory of meaning and the correspondence theory of truth. That is, words have meaning, and propositions are true, if they correspond to (or reflect, or represent) whatever is taken to be pre-existent 'reality' – either concepts in the mind or objects in the world or both together. In the extremest form of this position, taken by medieval speculative grammarians, or *modistae*, the structure of the universe and of the mind are regarded as simply congruent with that of the eight parts of speech; other, and subtler, medieval philosophers found no such automatic correspondence, and disputed at length about exactly how words could stand for things.⁵ But that they did so was not a matter of dispute: language could only be seen as making sense, 'signifying', by locating that sense in an a priori ontological order of some sort.

But this kind of order became much more difficult to postulate once the facts of linguistic change became, as they did for Valla, the focus of attention. His catalogue of such changes in the usages of Latin, called the *Elegantiae* (c. 1440), which he reworked and expanded over much of his career, became one of the most influential, frequently reprinted and abridged, textbooks of the period. In it, Valla invents the inductive, descriptive approach to grammar that will become the method of comparative philology in the nineteenth century and of linguistics in the twentieth. That is, he surveys actual usages; he does not prescribe rules, thus reversing the traditional procedure and incurring the bewildered wrath of

⁴ Salvatore I. Camporeale, 'Lorenzo Valla, "Repastinatio, liber primus": retorica e linguaggio', in *Lorenzo Valla e l'umanesimo italiano*, ed. O. Besomi and M. Regoliosi (Padua: Antenore, 1986), pp. 217–39.

⁵ The first chapter of Martin Elsky, *Authorizing words: speech, writing, and print in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), is a good, concise survey of this material, citing most standard authorities, to which should be added Norman Kretzmann's article on the 'History of semantics', in *The encyclopaedia of philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. VII.

some of his contemporaries, notably Poggio Bracciolini.⁶ Most importantly, in this text that virtually defines the humanist programme to recover the stylistic grace and semantic precision of ancient Latin, Valla regards the meaning of words as determined not by ontological correspondence, but by their manifold relations to other words and by their uses in historical contexts.

This practice, itself revolutionary, receives in Valla's most ambitious philosophical work, extant in three versions (1431–53) but generally known as the *Dialecticae disputationes*,⁷ theoretical analysis and conceptual justification. In the course of a root-and-branch attack on Aristotelian scholasticism (*Dialecticae*, Book 1), Valla submits the venerable dichotomy of *res* and *verba* to almost total dissolution. Proceeding from the twin paradoxes that written words are themselves 'things', and that the word 'thing' can signify any or all things and words, Valla collapses the entire distinction that allowed meaning to be exiled from language into some pre-constituted object-world. 'It makes no difference', he writes, 'whether we say, what *is* wood . . . or, what does "wood" . . . *signify*.' He collapses being into meaning, ontology into semantics – for what the thing is, is simply what the word means. There is no separate ontological realm to which words must correspond – for the use of the word constitutes that realm. So the central philosophical question for Valla becomes 'what kind of *word* is *x*?' – that is, what work does it do in common usage? This question elevates the semantic determinant of *consuetudo loquendi*, which Valla found in Quintilian (and used as a leitmotiv in all his writing), into a principle which invalidates the referential theory of meaning and the correspondence theory of truth, a principle that is 'nothing other than Wittgenstein's "grammar of the word"'.⁸ In this radical reconception of philosophy, language 'is not a sign or copy of pre-extant things', but rather the cognitive process of concept-formation that identifies those things in the first place – for Valla 'the second, specifically *human* creation of the world, the model of reality'.⁹

Such a radical revision of received ideas about what language and philosophy are and do, presented with iconoclastic delight in texts of extreme

⁶ Their quarrel on the issue is analysed by Salvatore I. Camporeale, *Lorenzo Valla: umanesimo e teologia* (Florence: Istituto Palazzo Strozzi, 1972), pp. 180–92. For the text of the *Elegantiae*, see E. Garin's edition and reprint of the 1540 Basle edition of the *Opera omnia* (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1962), 2 vols.

⁷ All the versions are now consultable in the critical edition of Gianni Zippel, *Laurentii Valle repastinatio dialectice et philosophie*, 2 vols. (Padua: Antenore, 1982). The version most circulated in the period was that in Valla's 1540 *Opera omnia*.

⁸ Camporeale, 'Repastinatio', p. 233. Other parallels between the language philosophies of Valla and the later Wittgenstein are noted by Richard Waswo, *Language and meaning in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 103–4.

⁹ Hanna-Barbara Gerl, *Rhetorik als Philosophie: Lorenzo Valla* (Munich: W. Fink, 1974), p. 65.

difficulty, did not fail in Valla's time, in Wittgenstein's, and in our own, to generate often vehement controversy. More important, however, than the debates then or now about the nature and validity of Valla's efforts, are the historical consequences of his assault on the assumed and ancient relation between *res* and *verba* that made the latter but the representational shadows of the former. Though Valla's revolution in philosophy itself remained only posited,¹⁰ his practice of interpreting texts, enormously diffused and influential through the agency of the *Elegantiae*, provided a working model of how language conveys meaning without corresponding to some ontology. And this working model established as practice the fundamental humanist opposition to the scholastics, which consisted in regarding language as 'a cultural artifact rather than an abstract philosophical instrument'.¹¹ The largest consequence, in short, of the challenge posed to the old *res/verba* relation, both by Valla's explicit theoretical assault and the implicit habit of treating usage and history as semantic determinants, was simply that it could no longer be merely assumed. Having been denied, it had to be (and endlessly was) reasserted. The scholastics decontextualized language, removing it from its actual existence in society and time in order to make it a more transparent sign of a prior ontology. Valla deontologized language, in order to replace it in the actual social contexts of its history and use, finding its meaning precisely in this use, and not in some postulated elsewhere. Most subsequent humanists did both: appropriating Valla's practices (and his tastes), and yet insisting on the ancient conception that these practices contradicted.

The contradictions are apparent in many sixteenth-century grammarians who follow what one scholar calls a 'mixed approach' to their subject: on the one hand, they analyse it in the humanist way as a semantic determinant, treating *verba* as meaningful without recourse to *res*; on the other hand, they continue the scholastic way of classifying the universe 'with a one-to-one correspondence between names and things'.¹² Almost any writer on language in the sixteenth century will exhibit some degree of oscillation between conceiving it explicitly as referential and treating it implicitly as constitutive of its own meanings. But referential to exactly what, and exactly how? These problems were inherent from the beginning in the whole Platonic/Aristotelian postulation of separate realms, *res* and *verba*, that had somehow to be linked; the nature of the link, and just what

¹⁰ It was understood neither then nor now, as Camporeale (*Umanesimo e teologia*, p. 169) observed. No account of it, for example, save a brief defence by Lisa Jardine (p. 179) of his innovative dialectical procedure of examining the 'grammar' of words, is to be found in *The Cambridge history of Renaissance philosophy*, ed. C. B. Schmitt *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹¹ Elsky, *Authorizing words*, p. 36.

¹² G. A. Padley, *Grammatical theory in western Europe, 1500–1700: the Latin tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 30–9.

it was with, furnished the central arguments between the medieval realists and nominalists, and were the entire preoccupation of the *suppositio* theorists. Along came Valla to abolish the separation and the theoretical need for a link, and the new discipline of historical philology to find the meaning of words in contexts of use. Here, of course, no *final* determination of meaning was possible; it could only be interpreted and reinterpreted in the endless chain of glosses on glosses evoked by Montaigne in 'De l'expérience'.¹³ Final, determinate, and unchanging significance was what the old correspondence theory promised (no matter that it had and has still eluded fulfilment), and the desire for this seemed to intensify in the seventeenth century as a direct result of its having been gravely and continually threatened, first by humanism and second by the Reformation, in the preceding century and a half.

The intensity of the desire may be gauged by two powerful forms of resurgent interest in reasserting the old view; only now, after the threat, it required argument of another sort. One such sort had long existed in the mystical speculations of the Neoplatonic and hermetic traditions, which found ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs to be allegorical of the structure of the universe. Similarly, and more directly relevant to the embattled study of Scripture mandated by the Protestant Reformation, the cabalistic tradition could find the whole world symbolically encoded in the twenty-two consonants of the Hebrew alphabet. The prestige of the latter was enhanced for many by identifying it with the language of Adam, whose naming of the animals (Genesis 2: 19–20) was almost universally regarded as a perfect form of ontological correspondence, since, as one English commentator put it in 1608, 'names were given at the first according to the severall properties and nature of creatures'.¹⁴ During the sixteenth century, Johann Reuchlin, Henry Cornelius Agrippa, Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas, and Alexander Top were among the promoters of Hebrew as the origin of all languages (now, after Babel, all corrupted) and the perfect, perhaps recoverable, model of the intrinsic connection between words and things.¹⁵ Here was one way to reassert (if not to explain) the connection that kept words the infallible signs of the essential nature of things: it was ordained by God. The trouble was, like Eden, it was since lost, and so required rather daunting processes of restoration, available to initiates only after years of study.

Facing this problem, and sharing this desire for an ultimate guarantee that language conformed to reality, some seventeenth-century speculators decided it would be simpler just to invent a language – that is, a sign-system

¹³ Michel de Montaigne, *The complete essays*, trans. D. M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), pp. 815–18.

¹⁴ Quoted by Waswo, *Language and meaning*, pp. 284–5.

¹⁵ These writers and others are reviewed by Elsky, *Authorizing words*, pp. 139–46.

– that would, infallibly, do so. Hence the various proposals for a ‘universal character’, some kind of transparent and unambiguous hieroglyphics that would encode once and for all everything in the world. To do this, of course, required that everything in the world be conceptually classified. The extent to which this new endeavour (which was pursued sporadically until the end of the eighteenth century) was the last gasp of the old scholastic assumption that *verba* stood for *res* is manifest in the fact that the classifications made in the fullest proposals ‘were but emended versions of the logical categories of Aristotle’.¹⁶ These, regarded as the given order of reality, were what the invented graphic notations would represent – clearly and universally, by analogy with numerals and algebraic equations. Thus the lost link between *res* and *verba* once ordained by God might be reforged by men, repairing the ruins of Babel. The motivation of this project, the extent to which it was made necessary by the whole humanist insistence on language as a socio-historical product, is stated by its best-known exemplar, Bishop John Wilkins. The problem, as he sees it, is precisely the fact of history: it is that ‘Letters and Languages’ were not invented by ‘Rules of Art’, but instead were all derived from some original, ‘or else, in a long tract of time, have, upon several emergencies, admitted various and *casual alterations*; by which means they must be liable to manifold defects and imperfections’.¹⁷ The defects are these: polysemy, metaphors, idioms, synonyms, grammatical irregularities, differences between orthography and pronunciation – in short, all the features that make natural languages natural, which had largely furnished the subject-matter of humanist rhetoric and philology, and had been everywhere at issue in all the arguments the Renaissance had produced about translation and biblical interpretation. Wilkins and his ilk wished to end the wrangling in the most traditional way, by firmly reattaching words to the order of things, which would give them fixed and final meaning. But ordinary words were, now, seen as hopeless for this purpose, and so were abandoned in quest of a sign-system that would obey rules and correspond forever to the order of reality.

Such projects, of course, came to nothing; but in the poignancy of their desire to escape the human world of society and time, they recall Wittgenstein’s sadness at the end of the *Tractatus*, where, after doing at a higher level of abstraction pretty much what Wilkins was seeking – laying down the conditions of a symbolic system that would clearly record what is the case in the world – he concluded that most of the human world could not

¹⁶ James Knowlson, *Universal language schemes in England and France 1600–1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), p. 101. This work is a complete and cogent survey of the field.

¹⁷ *An essay towards a real character and a philosophical language* (London: Samuel Gellibrand and John Martin, 1668), p. 19.

thus be spoken about.¹⁸ Reasserting the correspondence of *res* and *verba* in mystical hieroglyphs or in an invented, rationally transparent, graphic code did not do the job. The other seventeenth-century form of the same reassertion, however, had quite apparently spectacular success. This was nothing less than empirical science. Francis Bacon's famous analysis of the 'Idols' that prevented our accurately knowing the world had included the same kind of objections to the deficiencies in natural languages remarked by Wilkins.¹⁹ But Bacon was not thereby seduced into the invention of an artificial language to do what natural ones failed to; his own *abecedarium naturae* is a purely heuristic metaphor, which, he insists, 'should by no means . . . be received for true and fixed division of things. For this would be to profess that we know the things which we inquire; since no one can divide things truly who has not a full knowledge of their nature'.²⁰ For Bacon, there is not any *given* order of nature precisely because it remains to be discovered by the great instauration of the experimental method it was his business to promote. Since we do not know this order yet, we cannot possibly devise a language that will refer to it. Bacon's whole programme, of course, is predicated on the absence of correspondence between language, the mind, and reality, and the whole aim of the programme is to restore it. The mind is to be purged of its errors, and natural language to be pruned of all its misleading figurative concepts and expressions, so that, as the cumulative result of whole communities of enquirers, a gradual and correct description of the world will emerge. As one scholar observes, the Royal Society will take on this necessarily never-ending 'task of maintaining the correspondence between word and thing'.²¹ And just this task will also be accepted by Hobbes and Locke.

Considered with respect to the theory of language, the Renaissance, often regarded as the birthplace of linear, progressive modernity, seems rather to make a great circle, ending pretty much where it began, triumphantly reasserting the ancient referential view against all the challenges to it that had arisen. Valla's philosophy and the humanist discovery of time in the usages of Latin had radically historicized language, finding its meaning in its social uses and not in its referents. The seventeenth century, both at its margins (of mystical speculation) and in its mainstream (empirical science and rationalist philosophy) reontologized language with a vengeance. Only the ontology was different (in the mainstream) – no longer an *a priori*

¹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1933), § 7.

¹⁹ Francis Bacon, *The advancement of learning*, ed. G. W. Kitchin (London: Dent, 1915), pp. 132–4; *Novum organum*, vol. 1, pp. 39–44, 59–60, in *Works*, ed. J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis, and D. D. Heath, 14 vols. (London: Longmans, 1857–74), vol. IV, pp. 53–5, 60–2.

²⁰ *Works*, vol. V, p. 210. ²¹ Elsky, *Authorizing words*, p. 179.

order made visible in grammar, but an order to be painstakingly discovered that languages would have to be disciplined in order to reflect. The correspondence between *res* and *verba* had been transformed from an assumption into a purpose, with a concomitant and crucial change in how its achievement could be recognized. The question of the criteria for judging when correspondence had occurred hardly arose under the old assumption (since it was what was assumed), except for medieval logicians who became thereby obsessed with the forms of the syllogism as the only reliable (indeed, tautological) guarantor of truth. But the criterion under the new purpose was unmistakable: a statement about the world corresponded to it when it could successfully predict what would happen in it. The new criterion was the ability to control material phenomena – to replicate experiments and accurately predict their outcomes. And this new enterprise of knowledge as power succeeded, of course, beyond even Bacon's wildest dreams.

That such success at control was, indeed, a validating criterion for the correspondence theory of truth has been persuasively denied by some historians of science;²² but the referential view of language thus presupposed continues, and continued throughout the Renaissance, to dominate most formal discussion of literature. For example, the sixteenth century's most systematic and influential treatment of literary theory, which synthesizes the period's recovery of and arguments about Aristotelian *mimesis* and Horatian didacticism, grounds it explicitly in the representational theory of language. Words are simply pictures of things as they exist, and in fiction, as they don't exist; what words mean in both cases is whatever they stand for.²³ The ontological status of such things is not of much concern to literary theorists, as it was to logicians and philosophers; they assume the process of representation and focus their attention on its purposes: to please and instruct. And this kind of attention, to the psychological effect of written words on readers, was the way in which literature was assimilated to the ancient art of rhetoric, the oratorical persuasion of hearers.

Although neither in textbooks of rhetoric nor in literary theory did this kind of attention modify the old referential assumptions about language itself, it did modify them in the most hotly contested arena of dispute about interpretation: the biblical. Both Erasmus and Luther found in Scripture a kind of meaning that was not referential at all, but was rather constituted by the emotional impact of words on readers. They developed

²² Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Paul Feyerabend, *Against method* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

²³ Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Poetices libri septem* (Geneva: Jean Crispin, 1561; facs. reprint Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1987), pp. 1, 346–7.

a new kind (and stimulated a new industry) of biblical exegesis in which semantics is not representational, but affective and performative. Thus to apprehend language not merely as changing the mind, but moving the will, had consequences for profane literature far greater than those of the period's explicit theories. The revolution in linguistic philosophy that the Renaissance proposed was consummated only in its practice. That, however, is another story.