

Hermolao Barbaro and Early Modern Latin

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Roundtable: Worlds of Words: Greek and Latin Lexicography in the Renaissance in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

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RSA Berlin 2015

This paper rather grandly has "Early Modern Latin" in its title. In reality its scope is more restricted. In the quarter of an hour at my disposal I shall explore how Barbaro used the Romance vernaculars as witnesses to ancient Latin and thus tried to recover words which were attested poorly or not at all in the written sources from antiquity for the word pool of contemporary Latin.

Ermolao Barbaro was born in 1453 or 1454 into a Venetian patrician family. From a young age he accompanied his father on various embassies to other Italian cities, to Rome and Verona, to Naples, in 1480 again to Rome, in 1485 to Milan. He himself was Venetian ambassador in Milan 1488-89, and from 1490 ambassador to the Curia in Rome, where he was to remain for the rest of his life. This itinerary allowed him to experience the linguistic diversity of the Italian peninsula at first hand and acquire a copious knowledge of the local varieties of the Italian vernacular.

Guarino had been the trailblazer of humanist Latin, Valla had established the ground rules, Tortelli had defined the relationship between Latin and Greek from a humanist perspective, Perotti had defined the Latin lexicon of humanism. Thus Ermolao Barbaro entered a world of Latin learning which had made considerable progress in a few decennia. There were, however, still significant gaps in the reacquisition of ancient culture and language, and one of them Barbaro set out to close: the recovery of the knowledge and language of ancient natural science, Greek as well as Latin. First, he translated the *De materia medica* of Dioscorides into Latin; then he embarked on an encyclopedia which, chapter for chapter, confronted Dioscorides with other Greek and Latin natural scientists, the so called *Corollarium in Dioscoridem*. The major Latin source for this project was Pliny's *Natural history*, a work which had arrived at the Quattrocento with a hopelessly corrupt text. Barbaro set out to write a commentary on Pliny, which explained the necessary emendations and other difficulties. He brought this work to print in two volumes in the winter of 1492/93, under the title *Castigationes Pliniana*. The Dioscorides remained in manuscript, when he died, not yet forty years old, in the following summer, and was only published by his brothers in 1517.

This project also had a practical side: to connect the information from antiquity (plant names etc.) with present day knowledge. Absent a valid taxonomy, Renaissance natural scientists depended on the – often imprecise – descriptions in their sources to correlate the animals, plants etc. with their modern counterparts.

[...] Apud nos quidem maenarum specie, candidiores tantum ac minores quidam pisciculi visuntur, quos girros et girrulos vulgo dici constat. Sint hi nec ne, haud constat. [Castig. I 32,45 (CONGER, GYRES)]

(SEA-EEL). Also nowadays can be seen small fish similar in appearance to the *maena*, though lighter coloured and smaller, which by the people (*vulgo*) are called *girri* and *girruli*. Whether these are the same or not, is uncertain.

Obviously, the identification discussed in this quotation was triggered by the coincidence of modern vernacular and classical Latin nomenclature. This could be a valuable tool, but the coincidences had to be evaluated case by case and were – as we see in the quoted example – not necessarily meaningful. Barbaro took this approach a step further:

Sed abacus e ligno quidem erat parte plurima. Verum et e marmore vel structura factam planiciem ad sessum habilem, abacum vocabant; nam et calcis usum in abacis fuisse Plinius in mentione silis docet xxxiii volumine. Nam et podiorum et columnarum abacos sive, quod idem est, cubilia in Vitruvio quis non legit? Dicitur et solis abacus pro disco eius astrologis. Vulgus ipsum hodie quicquid tale est in quo multi sedere possint, appellat abacum, detrita tantum, ut imperitae plebis mos est, vocali prima. [Castig. Gloss. A 1. Abaculus l. xxxvi c. 26]

ABACULUS. The *abacus* was mostly made from wood. But also a flat surface from marble or brickwork suitable for sitting was called *abacus*. But the *abacus* could also be used in board games, as Pliny informs us, when he discusses the yellow ochre (*sil*) in Book 33. And who has not read in Vitruvius about the *abaci* or the synonymous *cubilia* of platforms and columns? The astronomers also call the disc of the sun an *abacus*. The people (*vulgus*) today call something on which many can sit an *abacus*, but – as is the custom of uneducated folk (*imperita plebs*) – with omission of the first syllable (*abacus* > ital. *ba(n)co*).

Here Barbaro postulates a direct continuity between the Latin of antiquity and the vocabulary of the Italian vernaculars; the vernacular for Barbaro is still Latin, even if the words are spelled rather differently. As nearly all other authors writing in Latin (with the notable exception of Valla), Barbaro never gave the actual volgare-form as it was pronounced, when he wrote about a vernacular word. Barbaro tends to emphasize the illiteracy of his oral sources, for him the volgare is just badly pronounced Latin.

This leaves us with an enormous problem in interpreting this material: the uncertainty of the imaginative leap from the written form as given by Barbaro to the actual oral form as heard by him from some countryman. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that *vulgo*, *vulgaris* does not necessarily always mean ‘in the volgare’, but can also refer to ‘common’ latin words from the pragmatic domain, as we have them attested in inventories, testaments etc., where - moreover - it is often impossible to distinguish between latin and volgare forms. I have tried to overcome this difficulty by selecting examples where I feel certain that the discussion concerns a volgare-word and not just a commonly used Neo-Latin expression, and by consultation of Italian and Italian dialect dictionaries to identify the semantic equivalents Barbaro might have meant.

Barbaro uncouples the etymological research from the procedure of identification. Not only the form of a word may have changed since antiquity, even of the meaning has remained the same; also the meaning can have developed:

Euripi fossae in ludis circumdatae pro septis, quorum loco temporaria prius clostra fuerunt, auctore Plinio. Hinc natum existimo ut ludi equestres, quorum modo usus est tam multiplex, vulgari verbo clostra nuncupentur, hoc est clostrales. [Castig. Gloss. E 53]

There were trenches filled with water as fences at the circus games; in their place there had earlier been temporary fences (*clostra*) according to Pliny. Hence it comes that the equestrian tournaments, which are so frequent nowadays, in the *volgare* (*vulgari verbo*) are called *giostra* (*clostra*), that is ‘fenced-in games’ (*clostrales* sc. *ludi*).

The development of meaning in this example falls into the category of *synecdoche*, the transfer of a designation from the part to the whole, in this case from the ‘fence’ to the ‘games which happen within the fence’, and finally to ‘tournament’ irrespective of whether a fence is used or not; in Barbaro’s construction, the original meaning ‘fence’ is then lost in the modern, vernacular variety of the Latin word.

Due to the fracturing of the linguistic landscape of contemporary Italy, as Barbaro observes, one *volgare* dialect may have lost a Latin word which another one preserves:

[...] Est autem turdella turdi genus alterum quod in Venetia prouincia drexanos vulgo nominant, in Liguria priscum nomen retinent. [Coroll. 530 (VISCVM)]

(MISTLETOE). The *turdella* is another variety of the thrush (*a bird*), which in Venice by the people (*vulgo*) is called *dressano* (*drexanos*), but retains its old name in Liguria.

The majority of his Romance examples comes from the Italian vernaculars, but occasionally he adduces examples from other languages.

Matiana ex vico Aquileiensi sub ipsas Alpes, quibus similitudine respondeant Gangeris Paphlagonae urbe nascentia. Nunc Hispaniae vernaculo vocabulo matiana in commune sunt mala omnia. [Coroll. 169 (MALUS)]

(APPLE). The *matiana*-apple is grown in Aquileia, at the foot of the Alps; similar are the ones from *Gangra* in Paphlagonia. Nowadays in Spain in their vernacular (*vernaculo vocabulo*) generally all apples are called *manzana* (*matiana*).

But it is not only Latin which has left traces in the modern vernaculars. There is also the influence of Greek to be reckoned with. The influence of Greek could be exerted via Latin:

Suillum (sc. iecur) praefertur omnibus Aetio “si quis”, inquit “animal id arida fico pauerit”. Quod genus Graeci sycoton appellant, unde ortum puto, ut

imperitum vulgus omnia iocinora vocare ficata coeperit. [Coroll. 249 (IECVR APRINVM)]

Pig's liver is preferable to all according to Aetius, “if”, he says, “the animal is fed with dry figs”. This type the Greeks called *sycoton*, and that gave rise to the uneducated people (*imperitum vulgus*) calling all kinds of liver *fegato* (*ficatum*).

Here Barbaro postulates a sequence *sykoton* > *ficatum* > *fegato*; this is one of the brilliant hunches of Barbaro; not only is it linguistically correct, also the Latin *ficatum*, which Barbaro may have known from medieval sources (Hugutio), is actually attested in some Latin medical texts from antiquity, such as Caelius Aurelianus and Vindicianus.

However, according to Barbaro, Greek could also enter the Volgare directly:

Vulgus eam partem (*sc. ilia*) Graeca voce sed luxata inuersaque significat, non lagonem dicendo, sed galonem. [Coroll. 240 (PVLMONES ANIMALIVM)]

The people call that part (the groin) with its Greek designation (*sc. lagôn*), but taken apart and reversed, they don't say *lagone*, but *galone*.

Finally, I would like to give an example which formulates the city/country–polarity which underlies many of Barbaro's examples:

Cogitavi posse fieri, ut vulgus imperitum villicos appellare coeperit amaxarios ... (*white space in ms.*), unde natum quoque fuerit ut vernaculus sermo rusticam suppellectilem nuncupet *amaxariam* quamvis littera prima nomini adempta et penultima contra legem producta. Dixi rusticam suppellectilem, non quod verbum hoc a populo translatum non sit ad urbicam, sed ut originem barbarae dictionis ostenderem. [ep 49 (vol. I p.66) (1484)]

I have a theory that uneducated people (*vulgus imperitum*) began calling farm overseers *amaxarii* ('waggon-folk', from greek (*h*)*amaxa*, 'waggon'); this could also be the origin of the vernacular expression (*vernaculus sermo*) which calls a farmer's household goods *amaxaria*, though with loss of the first syllable and lengthening of the penultimate against the rules (*i. e. massaria/masseria*). I said 'farmer's household', not because that word was not applied by the people to city households, but to show the origin of this illiterate expression (*barbarae dictionis*).

In conclusion: Barbaro believes that besides the written sources of ancient Latin there is a second rail which allows independent access to the language and culture of antiquity: words of the Italian and other Romance vernaculars which preserve traces of ancient Latin and Greek which may not be attested in the written records. This transmission is oral, and thus has several characteristics which distinguish it from literary sources: it goes via the *imperiti*, *rustici*, the people without learning from the countryside. The words are often garbled, initial syllables left off, letters inverted. The transmission can be regionally limited, a word may be preserved in one dialect, but not in another. This

necessitates a collecting activity which Barbaro must have pursued over long periods of time.

As for Greek, already medieval theorists such as Hugutio and before him Petrus Helie had assumed a unity between Latin and Greek which allowed them to construct bilingual etymologies; humanists, who actually knew Greek, could multiply examples of Greek words which had somehow had a Latin fortuna. Barbaro takes this approach a step further: not only could Greek etymologies explain Latin words, but – as Barbaro shows with *masseria* – words in the volgare could be used to reconstruct Latin words and their Greek roots.

Barbaro is by no means the first to assume a continuity between ancient (Latin) and modern (Italian) language. The discussion about the relationship between Latin and the volgare goes back to the 1430s, to the *questione della lingua* discussed by Biondo and Bruni on whether or not ancient Roman society had been diglossic with Latin and a *proto-volgare* just as present society. Originally the question had been discussed as an urban phenomenon of the city of Rome. In the 1440s Valla in his contribution to the debate still found his examples in the Roman vernacular. The 1470s had seen an unprecedented valorization of Italian vernaculars (esp. Florentine) vis-à-vis Latin; clearly the horizon expanded, Paolo Pompilio in the 1480s emphasized that not only spoke the Rumanians Latin, as did the French and the Spanish, but he also had heard reports that there were remnants of Latin in Iudaea and at the shores of the Caspian sea. Clearly, Barbaro no longer privileges the vernacular of Rome, but tacitly assumes that Romance vernaculars everywhere carry traces of Latin, traces which not only confirm lexicographical information from written sources, but which even allow the humanists to recover parts of Latin which had been lost in the direct transmission.

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