

*Renaissance Truths: Humanism, Scholasticism and the Search for the Perfect Language.* Alan R. Perreiah.

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*Renaissance Truths* is an important and inspiring book not only for philosophers and historians of ideas specializing in early modernity, but also for theoreticians of language and, generally, for anybody with a genuine — professional or personal — concern in the function and development of language and languages. This seems to be a wide circle of interest for a book that deals with a past controversy over a dead language. Today Latin's long-lasting career as the lingua franca of scientists has definitely come to an end. Even in the fifteenth century, when the debate about how (not) to write in Latin took place, it had been nobody's native idiom, though it was not regarded as dead. The well-known exchange between Ermolao Barbaro and Giovanni Pico (for Perreiah's evaluation, see pages 161–62) and the entire language-reform program of the humanists saw it as an organism still capable of development. But behind this debate there are still unresolved issues for our understanding of language as such.

Taking his start from Umberto Eco's *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Perreiah shows both the humanists' call for a resurrection of classical Latin, and the basic Latin of Scholastic dialecticians as two different attempts at attaining the ideal universal language. Three authors are chosen to represent the various positions: the humanists Lorenzo Valla and Juan Luis Vives, and for Scholasticism, unsurprisingly, Paul of Venice (known to us mainly through Perreiah's thirty years of intense study, editorial work, and translation). Their theories on language and on truth are examined along with modern interpretations of their work.

While maintaining that “the two traditions . . . are complementary journeys to the same destination” and that “we have no fundamental conflict of theory, but rather some diplomatic relations between theories that . . . are in need of repair” (vii), the author actually shows, at the core of the conflict, two mutually exclusive views on the function and purpose of language, and on its relation to truth. On this level the conflict is far from being resolved today, continuing in an even more radical form: linguistic determinism versus a priority of thought as a common ground that allows for interlingual communication and translation. In debunking the die-hard prejudice against the Scholastic position, Perreiah not only shows how modern interpretations of the conflict (Richard Waswo, Erica Rummel, Ann Moss) adhere to one of these positions, but he also takes a stance against linguistic determinism.

Unlike most humanists, notably unlike Vives (whose *Adversus Pseudodialecticos* is interpreted here as a diatribe, an ironical exercise in rhetoric), Lorenzo Valla endorses linguistic determinism when he augurs a revival of ancient virtues following the revival of ancient Latin. Actually, the consistent theory of truth would be skepticism. But Valla endorses the objectivity and self-evidence of truth. An anti-Aristotelian unfamiliar with the development of Scholastic logic in his own time (foremost the theory of signification, supposition, and inference), he cannot be regarded as a competent or fair judge of his adversaries. His attempt to replace philosophy and formal logic by rhetoric and customary use might be explained if not justified by ignorance of the function and aim of logic. Yet he set the tone for later philosophers' bashing of a self-constructed dummy Scholasticism. Prejudice survived the original controversy and the use of Latin as the universal scientific language.

Scholastic-basic Latin, as Perreiah argues convincingly, never aimed at poetical perfection or at completely replacing vernaculars. It served a double purpose: a deliberately simplified medium for teaching logic to students with just a rudimentary command of Latin who continued to think in their native tongues, simultaneously translating the information received; it promoted, at the same time, the acquisition of the more sophisticated Latin needed for theological, juridical, and medical studies. Universal in quite a different sense — as an accessible language of transition — this barbaric Latin could never be replaced by the imitation of first-century Roman speech.

A clear structure, a substantial general introduction, and a summary (and some repetitiveness as to the main issues) make the text easily accessible for today's hasty readers, without any further compromises in style and contents.

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